

# *YOU ARE HERE:*

*FINDING YOURSELF IN MIDDLETOWN*



*AN ANTHOLOGY*

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## Finding Yourself in Middletown

### An Anthology

By:

Kristal All, Anna Butler, Rachel Crawley, Christina Dionesotes,  
Nate Hardin, Sarah Hollowell, Chris Hunley, Johnna Lorenzano,  
Cassie Lynch, Colin Noll, Jillian Simmons, Allison Springman,  
Hannah Vollmer, Laurn Wiseman, Brooke Wyant, and Robert Young





Department of English  
Robert Bell (RB), Room 297  
Ball State University  
Muncie, IN 47306

Website: [www.bsu.edu/english](http://www.bsu.edu/english)  
Email: [english@bsu.edu](mailto:english@bsu.edu)  
Twitter: [@bsuenglish](https://twitter.com/bsuenglish)  
Facebook: [BSU English Department](#)

Spring 2015

Cover design by Lauryn Wiseman  
Typography by Jeremy Flick

“A stranger unfamiliar with the ways of Middletown,  
dropped down into the city, as was the field staff in January  
1924, would be a lonely person.”

-- Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*



# Introduction

Welcome to Middletown, Indiana, the fictional town created by the 16 students in my ENG 444 Senior Seminar course, “Research and Fiction.”

I’ve wanted to teach this course since I arrived at Ball State in 2010. It’s the capstone course in English and comprised of students from all concentrations (Creative Writing, Literature, English Studies, Rhetoric and Writing, and English Education). The capstone project is supposed to be a “major, student-driven research project.”

I wanted to demonstrate that “a researched story” and “a research paper” aren’t that different.

I wanted to demonstrate that the creative process and the scientific process aren’t that different.

## **Together, we discussed these essential questions:**

- What does “research” mean in the making of art? How do writers conduct research and incorporate it into their work?
- When should you do research? At what part of the writing process? How do we avoid over-researching? How do we determine what material is relevant to our fiction and what’s not?
- What forms can this research take? (reading books, interviewing experts, engaging in immersion journalism/ethnography, taking research trips to libraries or archives, and, of course, Googling).
- What are the rewards and dangers of purposefully doing research as a fiction writer?

As someone who writes researched fiction, all of these questions are of great interest to me.

## **As you read the stories, you’ll see that:**

- The stories are linked by setting, character, and major events.
- This anthology pays homage to the long history of Middletown Studies.
- “Middletown” is a whole lot like Muncie, Indiana.
- Every student in the class—not just the creative writing majors—contributed to the anthology.

## ***Linked Stories***

In *The Triggering Town*, the poet Richard Hugo advised his writing students to distance themselves from their real hometowns by creating a fictionalized place

to call their own, a “triggering town.” This practice has a long-standing tradition in American literature: Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River*, Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg*, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County. These works inspired my own book *The Circus in Winter* about “Lima,” Indiana, a not-so-clever pseudonym for Peru, Indiana.

We began the semester by reading *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, *The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks, and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan. We talked a lot about the form, the difference that story order makes, and the ways in which the authors had purposefully linked their stories.

Using these books as models, my students began to create a fictional town: Middletown, Indiana.

## ***Middletown***

As you may know, Muncie is one of the most thoroughly studied cities in the country; in 1929 and again in 1935, sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd came to town in search of a “typical” American city, which they called “Middletown.”

Ever since, whenever researchers or journalists want to take the temperature of America, they come to Muncie—because it’s considered the most average small city in the country (which made my students chortle), a community that’s seen as the barometer of social trends in the United States.

We acquainted ourselves with the Middletown study by reading portions of the book, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, by watching portions of the Middletown documentaries (the landmark series from the 1980s) and by touring the Middletown archives, thanks to Digital Archivist Brandon Pieczko.

Then they started writing. The only rule was that they had to set their story in a year in which they were not alive.

We also decided for sure that our Middletown would not be as white or as straight as the Lynd’s.

## ***Structure***

The Middletown study was famously divided into six “spheres.”

- getting a living
- making a home
- training the young
- using leisure
- engaging in religious practices
- engaging in community activities

Initially, I wanted to organize our anthology in the same way, but I decided it might be best to let students write whatever story interested them the most, in whatever time period interested them the most, in whatever sphere interested them the most.

What emerged were stories that were set from the 1920’s to the 1980’s. They dealt with race and class and gender, politics, war on the home front, unsolved mysteries, and friendship. At first, there wasn’t much linking the stories except for the fact that they all took place in Middletown.

### **I grouped the students into four groups of four:**

- The 1930's group, which was about Muncie's (and Indiana's) troubled racial past.
- The 1940's group, which was about WWII.
- The 1960's group, which was about cultural changes.
- The 1980's group, which was about characters trying to leave Middletown.

They read each other's stories and created "nodes of conjunction" between their stories. You'll recognize those linkages as you read.

We voted on the title, the epigraphs, the order.

We did a storyboard of the anthology, laying all of the stories out on the board. We discussed how to best begin and end the book, whether to use chronological order or thematic order.

Ultimately, we decided on a roughly chronological order, but we did pay homage to the six thematic spheres—albeit in an ironic way.

It's worth mentioning that students were not graded on their short stories, but rather on the essay they wrote about the writing and research process that produced the story.

### ***What They Learned***

"I found that even one sentence, or the premise of a story, takes research. I knew that the majority of things "historical" would have to be looked up, but I didn't realize that every single part of the story is dictated by the time period. I also learned how to do research for characters; through other books and personal experience. This process was very important because growing up in academia, we are told to always look for "valid, credible sources" such as academic journals. However, those sources would not have been as helpful as photos of clothing or the map of Ball State's campus in 1968. This process has changed my opinions on what is research and what its overall purpose is in writing and life."

"In a literary analysis paper, which is what I'm much more accustomed to writing, you shine a light on your research. In researched fiction, though, the research needs to be invisible. This has consistently been one of the hardest parts of doing this research and writing this story. I do all this research and I want to say, "Hey! Look! I did all this research!" But this is not a research paper. Remembering that everything I put into the story has to be there for a reason, has to contribute and move the story forward in some way, was the most important thing that I had to constantly keep in mind throughout this process."

"The research process, as I conducted it this semester, became much more of an unstructured process of exploration than the strict, orderly thing that I've always thought research to be. This de-familiarization of the research process has been an encouraging experience, teaching me that doing research is nothing to be afraid of, and furthermore, that it can be fun. I am happy with this outcome, because research is something that we, as human beings, do every day and in every situation, every time we survey a room, every time we pull out a smart phone, every time we ask a question of another person. It would be a shame to fear these things, to fear knowledge."

“At some point in my school career, I became a lazy researcher. For term papers in elementary school I would go to the library and pour through book after book, making careful notes all along the way. In high school, I became a Googler. If I couldn’t find the answer in a Google search, I tended to decide that I didn’t really want or need to know it. I unlearned some of this in college, but I was still first and foremost a Google addict. I knew there were other sources out there, but I didn’t understand their value - and I didn’t until I started looking at research from a creative writing perspective. If you wish to truly understand and represent something in your fiction, it is not enough to Google the answers. Research must combine common sources like Google and books with out of the box sources like taking field trips and finding old yearbooks and popular magazines.”

“Throughout my journey to the final product, my research took many forms. I conducted interviews, analyzed photographs, watched videos, read magazines, watched documentaries, went to a house where a murder took place, read news articles, and looked at maps. Did everything appear in my story? No, but each source was rewarding in its own way because research, no matter how insignificant it seems, is still significant.”

I’m so glad that my students learned these things. I’m incredibly proud of the work they put into these short stories. And I’m humbled that we are adding another research artifact to the Middletown Studies archives.

And so I give you *You Are Here: Finding Yourself in Middletown*.

Cathy Day, Associate Professor  
Ball State University

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## Part 1

# Abusing Leisure

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

--"Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday

# Silence

Naté Hardin

(1922-1930)

*April, 1922:*

No one knew Middletown better than the air. No one could caress its fine points, or bury itself into the its crevices better than the wind. The sky knew whispers, specters of older times secrets lost within memoryless catacombs that were not to be discussed. The insects stuck themselves to the trees, crawling beneath the bark, igniting conversation with the thin dendritic branches about the birds, the bees, the White river.

No one knew Riverside Avenue better than the trees. They hid their experiences within the sinewy veins of their rough bark that furthered within their cambium. However, they motioned their distress that summer, violently calling to each other from yards away. There was a heat in the air that blackened the asphalt. Mad cicadas that screeched into the waves of pressure extending from tail pipes.

No one knew the Mantress family, not even the trees. Watching them wasn't intentional nor was it necessarily important, but it was interesting. The Mantress family was a variance, a new form of life to fill the residence at 2117 W Riverside that had been abandoned 5 years prior. The trees knew the fading paint, dulled and dirty concrete walkway. The trees knew the squirrels stuck in the chimney. The Mantresses, however, seemed to deviate from the predictability that formed the neighborhood.

They were quaint; two little girls with blonde pigtailed fastened with polka-dot bows, a broad shouldered father kissing the cheek of a slender, delicate mother. She wiped the corner of her mouth where the kiss had landed, correcting her red lipstick. The tree there stirred uneasy, restless, and curious about the Mantress family. The last family that took the residence was older. Through that couple, the tree realized frailty and mortality in human beings. It examined the couple's movements, slow and deliberate and was sung to sleep by the creaking of their oak rocking chairs that swayed back and forth like a metronome. The tree could still feel the indent of cat claws on its branches carved through by Agatha, the couple's pet.

Each tree in the neighborhood watched as the Mantresses pulled their items out of their vehicle and into their new home. Though there was unease, there was



more so an excitement, the same one that would come around every time another Model T glided by on the newly paved roads or each time the neighborhood children decided to climb their branches. The insects pulsed under their sleeves.

The Mantresses, though younger than the last residents, proved to be as traditional as any other family on Riverside. The male was away most of the day, revving the engine to his vehicle before the cast of daylight. The Female hummed often. It carried on the wind like leaves and shocked like a vibration of the earth. The trees went still when she hummed as she cleaned, as she cooked, as she hung her linens in the summer breeze. Then in the late afternoon the children would run through the grass towards their house, dancing, screaming in a way that intimidated the cicadas. The female would greet them and kiss them with a shock of red left on their cheeks and usher them into the house. The trees just waited for her to hum again. It would be dusk when the male returned, his briefcase seeming to weigh down his frame. Leaves called to him rustling and he'd ignore them, though perhaps not maliciously.

When the woman wasn't humming, she was crying. The tears would run in black streaks and drip off of her chin. The grass concluded they tasted like disease. When she wasn't crying, she was praying. That cross hung off of her neck and reflected the sunlight. She held onto it, made use of its metal frame as she squeezed it in her palms. We could hear it as we heard her hum "Hallowed be thy name..."

The trees did not know the use of religion. They did not contemplate a God, a higher power, a life after function. They only know to function; to allow their branches to wave in the wind, to absorb light and manifest it, recreate it, within themselves. That was function. However, they picked up those words on the wind, or the cicadas would repeat them, the raccoons, the birds. "Catholicism is an abomination." "God will find those bastards and extinguish them." "That what we're here for".

The Mantresses were non-traditional in a sense that they stayed home on Sunday afternoons (something only their residential tree noticed). Houses in that area vacated during their Sunday afternoons only to open in the early evening as families started their repast. However, the Mantresses did not allow themselves to leave their homes, when other residences were long empty. They'd simply sit themselves around their quarters and read their holy tome. Again their voice carried on the wind, in songs, in hums, in breathy testimonials. They'd hold hands, the trees could see through the windows, around their painted portraits of "Jesus Christ" and "Mary Magdalene". And as the other homes would fill with their owners later in the evening, the Mantresses would eat reflecting on their own worship.

Glass would shatter. Their chests heaved, mouths wide and teeth bare. The female and the male pierced each other with eyes that were meant for violence like those of Nuthatch birds. The glasses would break. Sometimes internally, when the male puffed himself up, violently screaming but muted by the windows. Insects scattered when the male's voice rose, when the woman stood as stone before it, picking up small piece of glass from the floor. Once, glass broke from an outside source. A rock through the window pane carved out the glass. Some of the extra pieces landed in shards on the lawn, others landed in their kitchen sink. But the trees knew the weight of the rock itself, heavy as children knocked

them against their trunks. The Mantresses did not seem to respond. Their faces, the trees, the birds, the wind knew, were solemn in a way that somehow meant defeat. But the Mantress female and male would simply sweep up pieces of glass and pick out shards from the sink. Their fingers were caked red, but they only washed them when the twins were outside playing in the mud.

Plastic replaced the windows. This was a process taking place in weeks, maybe months, the trees were not sure of time. But when one window was finally fixed, the others would be shattered, as if an earthquake rocked the foundation or by some magic. It was in this time that the other trees, turning orange with age, noticed the curtains close when the Mantresses Model T rolled along the asphalt.

It was one morning, as the male grabbed his briefcase to exit, that he came to notice the scrawling on this front door. Or more so, across the panels of his abode. The trees whistled, their colors starting to show in the peak of dawn. In dark markings was a circle and within the circle was a cross, stained charcoal on the front of his house. He gripped his briefcase. Then he threw it. He threw it against the concrete. The female emerged from behind their blue door and took him within her arms only for him to push away. She shook her head, glanced behind her, paused. However—and the cicadas were intrigued by this—she did not react. Not at first. Not within an immediate span of time. However, when she did react, it was only to once again go inside her abode and to once again emerge, this time with a bowl of water in her arms. She positioned herself in front of the cross, dug out a rag from her bowl and began wiping. And that was all. No words. No comment. The male cooled. He eventually joined her and also wiped down the house. No words were spoken in the time that they cleaned together or when the male picked up his briefcase from the concrete or when he started his Model T and rolled away.

This, the trees noticed was a rule of time. As long as you let enough of it pass, everything would remain stable. The Mantress themselves mimicked the seasons, watching and accepting change, watching and accepting hostility but continuing to silently wait until stability was reached once again. And even when the hooded men yelled at night, the Mantresses would silently stare back through the pane of a glassless window. And when the hooded men dug holes in the yard burning oak crosses, singeing the grass, the Mantress family would gather around as if watching the lighting of a Christmas tree. Their hands held, their eyes would reflect the flames. The female would hum and whisper again and again, “Hal-lowed be thy name...”

*April, 1925:*

Humans are no different from animals when it comes to savagery. Even as the rabbits hide in their burrows in the forest floor. As owls circle. As cicadas echo. What these creatures recognize is similar; when an animal approaches. Two males cloaked in dark hide, poignant eyes staring into the shadows of the trees, wrapped their fingers around toxic metal rods that aim into air. Foxes mimicked the manner of the humans, detecting their footsteps through the brush and concealing themselves behind bushes and tree bark and leaf coverings. The Fox perked its ears as the humans came closer to its hiding spot. Their footfalls are heavy, so much that they indented the ground and the sound reminded the fox of the thumping of deer hooves in the Fall. These creatures, however, were not

deer. The Fox peered through the bushes. These creatures, it noticed, seemed just as hungry as the Fox, the muscles in their jaws set, eyes ricocheting around their skulls. They pass by the bush and the Fox lifts its nose. Gunpowder and pine.

"You ever catch a fox before, Klinck?" One male voice pierced through the noise of the forest. The Fox shifted and sprinted to another tree. It knew it caught the notice of the males as they paused and looked behind them. But they continued on. The Fox peered once again at the two males from the bushes. "They hunt alone. Makes 'em harder to kill. Bet he's heard us by now."

The other male shuffled. The fox noticed his gun lower, his jaw loosen. From fatigue, the Fox concluded. "Its gon' be dark soon, Stephenson. I'm thinkin' about heading back."

Stephenson, a rotund male, a male who seemed to vibrate the ground when he walked, paused and dipped to the ground running his fingers through the dirt. "Foxes hunt at night. They're too bright in the daytime. You want a fox, you better follow." Stephenson raised his gun again and continued on as Klinck did. The Fox followed them anxiously, pouncing through the trees. It perked its ears into the air, listening in the distance. The pair of males were nearing its den, nearing the threshold of its progeny. Defending the den was impossible. Not without dying. Not without the progeny dying. Hiding is the only option for them all. "You haven't told me yet," Klinck started, "What we're doin' here. Fox huntin' in the middle of your mess."

Stephenson's shoulders relaxed as he slowed his steps. "The best part about fox huntin' isn't the kill. It's this look in their eye. Like...defiance. Like a secret. As if they knew some other way to die."

"Somebody's gonna find out about the girl." The Fox pounced too swiftly or landed on a louder spot of dirt than the others as twigs caught under its paws and snapped into the air. The Fox froze, as did the males. They looked into the dark, towards the bush the Fox hid itself under, and shifted the direction of their trek.

One of the males pressed, "What are we gonna do about the girl? Law won't look too kindly to this."

"Law?" The fox leaped through the pasture. The range was wider here. This was a place of schisms, where the forest divided itself and left a gap into the open. The Fox's den was hidden in this pasture, under the forest brush, under the deadfall from autumn leaves. The Fox's pulse quickened. "I am the Law. I am the Grand Dragon, the most powerful entity in this state. There is no 'law' that can judge me." The males closed in, the Fox panicked.

The Fox had been asked plenty, through other creatures eyes that challenged, what is cunning? what creature obtains cunning? And through these years, through the birth of its progeny, through the solitary and solitary moments, the Fox had defined it.

Beastliness.

Cunning, was an extension of beastliness. The Fox could sense this in itself. It could sense this in its panic as it sprinted towards its den, as it heard the explosion of gunpowder the bullet soar through the air. As it felt that bullet in its ribs. The Fox could feel this beastliness. However, as it collapsed to the ground, it could feel this beastliness more so in the predator that stood before it.

"Look at that," the rotund male announced, "look at those eyes. Creature like this can't have a God. The weak need to know that they're weak. Someone has to

show ‘em.”

The Fox looked towards its den. It could hear its progeny cry out. And then it again met the eye of the rotund male, those of his partner, as they peered down at him.

And he mimicked those words. Creature like this couldn’t have a God.  
There is no God in a savage.

*November, 1925:*

Humans are different from animals because they hide their waste. They create something new to nature out of elements found on this earth and once those products are used, they hide them in silver cylindrical tubes that are eventually collected by other humans to go into bigger hiding places. These were the conclusions of the raccoons. Every night they tore at these tubes, clawed at their tops until whatever was inside came out. And when the cylinder toppled, they’d rifle through and rip at bags full of waste. Edible waste, they concluded. What wasn’t edible, was discarded from the mind. Textured dough would be present in some tubes. Sweet pastes present in others. Shredded trees however, took up room in most.

Another factor to waste were footsteps. It proved to be a metronome on some occasions that warned the raccoons should dissipate. Not all footsteps were threatening, however, it was difficult to decipher their meanings through the clatter of the gravel and the human sole.

In this instance, along with those footsteps was shuffling and hoarse voices. The raccoons scattered as the footsteps came closer, others deep into the alley way but one hid away behind the cylindrical receptacles facing out towards the street.

A man and a woman stopped next to the toppled cylindrical tubes in the alley way. The Raccoon could smell them, a scent similar to the contents in the tubes, sour and musty and earthy all at once. The man coughed, a cough that seemed to take a away from the lungs with every hack and every bit of phlegm that dripped on the ground. The Raccoon felt uneasy. The woman bent over and rifled through the trash picking up fruit peels and containers only to discard them to the ground once again.

“Larry help me! I can’t keep findin’ dinner alone.” The woman sneezed at the end of her sentence, wiped her nose with the hem of her tattered coverings. The man, Larry, the Raccoon caught, grunted. “Dammit Louise. Will you give me a second? We have all night. Trash ain’t goin nowhere.” Louise growled as she continued her search. “You won’t be saying that when the damn raccoons take all the food.”

Louise tore through another bag and pulled out its contents. Just shredded trees and ink. The Raccoon could smell that. Paper, it remembered. They called that paper.

Louise stared down at the paper. That pause lasted long. It lasted longer than the raccoon thought it should have. Reading, the Raccoon remembered again. That’s called reading. “Hey Larry...”

“Dammit Louise, don’t rush me!” He coughed again, the contents dripping from his mouth.

Louise grabbed Larry’s torn sleeve. “Look at this, Larry. ‘Stephenson Found

Guilty’.”

Larry grabbed the paper from Louise and read through it himself. “I was sure he’d buy his way out of this one. Just like he bought Mayor Jackson. Just like he bought everything else.”

Louise shook her head. “It’s just sickening what happened to that Madge girl. Stephenson’s a monster.”

Larry threw the paper back into the can and the Raccoon chased after it, tearing at it as it dug through the bags once again.

The raccoons didn’t necessarily have an interest in politics. They didn’t know the significance of human coverings or gemstones. They didn’t care of sexuality, of dominant human males over subservient human females. They did know that this is 1925. They did know about the buzzing of human voices. They continued to dig through waste bags, pulling out shredded trees with ink on them. Shredded trees with imitations of faces printed upon them. The Raccoon licked tomato paste off of the cheek of the man printed on the paper. The animal only peered at the man for a moment and immediately understood his face, his guilt, his crimes. Raccoons knew murder. Raccoons knew murderers, as they knew the eyes of a predator, the footfalls of a predator. The Raccoon, eyes wide, continued to shuffle through waste bags until the scent of burning oak is picked up in its nostrils and it fled, knocking over a tube painted with a circle and a cross.

*August, 1930:*

For the past few years, there has been an infestation of ravens circling the simmering summer streets of Middletown. The thick-billed passerines swoop down towards prey and elevate again to the shutters of houses, picking apart their meals. The ravens know of human complaint and in fact, they know more about humans than humans know about themselves. The ravens know they keep bright feathered cardinals from picking at the tree branches. They know the humans do not like this.

The ravens don’t remember where they came from or how they ended up in this suburb. It may have been suburban allure that lead them to reside in the close knit communities. The allure of insect larva in the holes of tree bark or open cans of human waste. It may have naturally been the summer that lead whistling winds and carried the smell of crabapple trees. It may have also been the fact that no other birds were here. Ravens can assess situations with efficiency. They have been around human interaction long enough understand hostility towards birds, which they could not find in Middletown. They could not find a bird carcass. The waste was free to dine upon. But there are no other birds.

This Raven however, one who would never travel with any particular Unkindness, set out into the morning dawn before the heat of the sun could send the suburban smells to the sky. This Raven knew of human hostility and could feel it in the air. It was something unsettling. The Raven rustled its feathers and was set airborne to find the source of trouble.

Flashing lights that dimmed out the morning sun pulsed by a giant brick building. The Raven perched itself on a branch nearby, examining the sight. A tall human male pushed at the frame of one of two human males hanging from a tree. Once human males, the Raven thought to itself, hungry. Other humans surrounded the scene dressed alike with their woven hats, their shiny buckles, the canis-

ters around their waists loaded with incendiaries. The Raven glided to the next branch, the branch the human males were hanging from. Their stench wafted upwards, carried by the oncoming wind and tantalized the bird without the help of an afternoon sun.

The tall male traced his hands along the body of a hanging man, lifting up his leg coverings, exposing his dark skin. He whispered to the male perched beside him, one dressed in darker colors as the rest of the surrounding squad. "Lower Tibial fracture. Older than the hang. Probably happened in his cell." He crawled to the next body and lifted up his thoracic coverings. "Internal bleeding. Probably a punctured lung caused by the 7th and 8th rib." The tall man pulled the fabric from his hands and tossed them on the ground.

"Sounds like the Klan." The darkly clothed male concluded. "These boys were jailbirds already. Rape and burglary."

The tall man shook his head. "They're already in hot water after that Stephenson debacle in '25. I doubt they'd pull any more risky performances. Looks like Mob action."

The male straightened his head covering and sighed, "Sure is a shame. So young."

The tall man extracted a stick from a box and set it against his mouth lighting it aflame. "You can get those boys down whenever you're ready, Mark," He added as he exhaled dust. The male called behind him and others surrounded the tree, the hanging males, the Raven, and pulled the humans down from the tree. They fell to the ground in loud thuds, the force of their limp bodies making indents in the dirt. The Raven screeched, taking in the pronounced scent of coagulating blood and decaying muscles and tissues. The Raven swooped down stretching its beak wide, only to be swatted by a human male. With an unsatisfactory huff the Raven retreated hearing behind it, "These damn birds."

# Slivers of Hope

Jillian Jenee

(1930)

**Johnny Thompson**

*August 16, 1930 - 12:15 a.m.*

“Ah! Shit!”

“Get up, Johnny! Get up!” Mary lifts me off the ground after I take a hard fall on the cold concrete sidewalk. The four of us continue to race to the courthouse on West Main Street where Noah, George and Sam are about to meet their horrible fate. I hold on tight to Mary’s hand. She’s starting to tire from all the running. I stop and quickly throw her over my shoulders. Only a few more feet to go. Cal and Sally are running right next to me.

As we arrive in front of the courthouse, we stop abruptly bent over completely out of breath. Cal and Sally’s blonde hair is wet and dripping with sweat. I let Mary down and look into her beautiful brown eyes forming tears that are beginning to stream down her smooth, brown face and curve over her full pink lips that are trembling with fear. She looks into my blue eyes and a small smile drifts over some of the worry in her face. I feel like a failure as these were the same blue eyes she looked into when I told her that Whites and Blacks will one day overcome all this hatred and become one as a people. We will be able to get married without facing any criticism from our community for her being this beautiful black girl and I, a White boy who is the son of one of the cruelest Ku Klux Klan leaders, Mark Thompson.

Hundreds of people gather beneath the old oak tree right in front of the courthouse. Two men, that I recognized from some of my father’s klan, swing ropes over the branches as the crowd cheers and shouts words of both hostility and excitement.

“Hang those damn niggers!” yells an old man in the crowd.

Someone turns on a radio that plays Wabash Cannonball by Roy Acuff in the background. We turn and look at the guy.

“Is that who I think it is?” asks Cal.

“Sure is,” I say. “That son of a bitch.”

The guy who turns on the radio is James Hamlin. He goes to Middletown University with Cal, Sally and I and is a member of me and Cal’s fraternity, The Navajos. Standing around him dancing to the music are more members of our



fraternity and students from Middletown. There are also some guys from the Young Men's Christian Association, which is a huge surprise to me. In every meeting, all we talked about was how important it is to love every human being, no matter the color of their skin. I thought we stood for love, compassion, and the teachings of God's grace and humility in the Bible. Not this shit. Guess I thought wrong.

I look around and see no other Blacks here. A sudden rush of fear comes over me as I realize that Mary is the only one and she's standing with me.

"Mary, we should go now before..."

At that exact moment, two young blondes from Sally's sorority approach us.

"Why are you standing there with your arms around that nigger girl?" asks the one with a large pearl necklace tightly hugging her neck.

"She...is...not...a...NIGGER!" I yell.

The girls jump and run back over to the group of other young, White guys and girls dancing around the radio. They open bottles of beer and are dancing so in a way you would think that we are at one of the frat parties on a Saturday night. They seem proud about what is happening. There is no sign on anyone, young or old's face that shows any compassion or sadness for the lives of Noah, George and Sam. They could care more about a dropped penny on the sidewalk than my friends hanging from a tree.

"Mary, people will see us. We have to go!"

"Let them see. I won't leave them," she says with slivers of hope within her voice.

"But there is nothing we can do," I say. I take my jacket off and wrap it around her hoping to hide her, but I fear that it's too late. We need to leave.

"Look!" screams Sally. We turn and see George, Noah and Sam standing at the top of the courthouse steps with their hands cuffed behind their backs and a look of terror and fear in the forms of tears melting from their eyes and dripping like hot candle wax down their black faces. They've been beaten. All of their faces and bodies are covered with scars and bruises. Their clothes are bloody and have been ripped so that their sleeves are missing and Noah only has one pants leg. Their shoes are missing as well as their socks and Sam's hat that you never see him without.

They stand beneath the tree. A few white men put the ropes around their necks and tighten them. A woman in the crowd screams, "Let the one on the end go!"

It's Noah. Sweet Noah has been saved, but poor George and Sam...poor George and Sam...

Mary presses her body into mine and cries loudly. Her tears and pain sinks through my shirt, my skin and into my heart and soul. I can't help but to cry and scream. My friends, my brothers...I can't watch! We're so young. Sam and George are only sixteen and seventeen. How could people be so cruel to people so young with so much to live for?

I kiss all over Mary's face then look up at all the windows of the courthouse. In one of the windows, I see two White officers and a klan member standing with their flag, a long, square piece of cloth with a cross in the center. The men are laughing as if watching clowns perform in a circus act. My attention to the men in the window catches the attention of Mary. I look down at her and can see the

hate and anger in her face. She lets out a loud gasp. I look back up and see that the klan man has taken off his hood. The eyes of my father stares down at me with fierce fury and disgust.

### **George Downs**

*August 15, 1930: 12:42 p.m.*

"I'm tellin' ya George. I'm gonna have me a nice ride like your 1926 Ford Convertible Coupe here sometime before the end of this month. I just know it," says Sam staring out of the window. His eyes light up every time we pass one of those new Fords. Sam Reese was always going on about something. Always. Even if it didn't make a lick of sense.

"And where are you gonna get the money to buy it, Sam?" I ask.

"Don't worry. I'll get the money even if I have to steal it." A huge grin is on his face and I know that he's serious, but I ignore him and park on East Charles Street in front of the Irish Confectionary, the only store around here that allows Blacks and Whites. The owner, Harry Beagle, said that the only color he cared about was green. The color of money. Some folks didn't come here just because of that, especially the old folks. Us youngins' don't mind, though. Harry's got the best malts in all of town.

Sam and I can hear them from outside as we walk in. Johnny Thompson, Noah Brooks and Cal Mulberry are falling from the counter laughing. The girls are rolling their eyes as they usually do when us guys are talking crazy.

"What's so funny?" asks Sam as we walk up and stand next to them at the counter.

Barely able to speak through his laughter, Noah replies "Some White boy in Kentucky in that foolish tree sitting contest then fell out of tree and died."

We all crack up in a big ball of laughter.

"I don't see what's so funny about a young boy no older than us dying from falling out of tree. It's really sad actually," says Sally Hunley, Cal's beautiful blonde, blue-eyed gal with pearls hanging around her neck and a short, black dressing fitting her just right.

"Dying from a damn tree?!" Cal laughs and throws his hands in the air. "That's the funniest thing I've heard since...since...Well, damn I ain't never heard nothing so funny in my life!"

"What if one of you were to die from a tree?" asks Sally with one of her eyebrows raised as she stares directly into Cal's eyes. The smile clears from his face and he turns serious.

"Well...baby...I guess...We'll never find out cuz I wouldn't be up there in the first place." Cal once again falls on the floor laughing.

"Get up now!" says Harry, the owner of the shop. His White face wrinkles in anger. "You're gonna get your white shirt all dirty."

"Oh it's alright," says Cal standing up wiping the dust off of his shirt and black pants.

"Don't you boys have anything better to do than to come here every day cacklin' and carryin' on?" asks Harry as he hands me and Sam two chocolate malts.

"I'm gettin the feeling you don't like us, Harry," says Cal.

"Of course I do," says Harry through gritted teeth.

“Good. We love comin to your store and havin a good ol’ chocolate malt every day.” Harry doesn’t crack a smile, but that doesn’t seem to bother Cal, who is doing enough smiling for all of us.

“Hey, where’s Mary?” Cal asks Johnny. “She ain’t run off with a colored boy, has she?”

Mary Townsend is Johnny’s little Negro girl. She has bright brown eyes that remind me of the stars in the sky and a big round ass that’ll make any man howl at the moon and makes me wanna howl even louder. I tried a while back to get with Mary, but she only has eyes for Johnny ever since we all met two years ago outside of Carter’s Diner on the corner of Madison and Willard when they were kicking us out for being niggers. Cal and Johnny were walking in as we were walking out. Cal made a joke about Noah’s white shoes that had turned almost completely black. After Noah explained that his mom didn’t make enough money cleaning houses to pay the bills and feed three children, Cal and Johnny invited the four of us to the Irish Confectionary for some malts. I met Mary in grade school when we were youngins and we’ve been friends ever since. I don’t see how Johnny and Mary are ever gonna work out since Johnny’s father is the head of the klan here, but they don’t seem to care. Noah and I keep telling Johnny that he’s just asking for trouble if his father ever finds out.

“Mary is at home. She said she’s not feeling well and we’re trying to keep low. My dad kicked my ass the other day after his friend told him that he saw me with a black girl. I had to lie and say it wasn’t true, but he kicked my ass anyway” says Johnny.

“Sick? What’s wrong with her?” asks Noah. Sally looks away and begins sipping on tiny morsels of the last remaining drops of her malt.

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me, but I’m going to head over there now to check up on her while her mom is still at work. See you guys.” Johnny grabs his jacket and starts walking towards the door.

“Wait a minute man!” I say stopping him. “You think you, Johnny Thompson, is just gonna drive into the negro part of town without anyone gettin’ to you?”

“It’s alright. I’ve done it a few times. The people know me there,” says Johnny with a smirk on his face.

“Alright, man. You sure be careful,” I say as he opens the door to leave.

“And don’t forget the Navajo meeting tonight at 8!” Cal yells after him. The four of us watch as he leaves and wait a few minutes in silence for him to get far enough away from the confectionary to not hear us.

“Give it up, Sally! What’s going on with Mary?” asks Noah.

“Now that’s nobody business, but their own,” says Sally.

“What’s going on? Is she ok?” I ask. Sally doesn’t say a word. I look at my watch. 2:00 p.m.

“Hey guys, Common Clay starts in a little while. We should get going,” I tell them.

“Well gulp down that malt so we can get goin’,” says Sally.

Sam and I pick up our malts and sip ‘em quickly. Cal leaves the money for Harry and we head on to the Crown Theater on East Main Street.

**Sally Hunley**

*August 15, 1930 – 3:38 p.m. – Crown Theater on East Main Street*

Cal's hand is cold. He won't get it off my thigh and keeps slipping his way up to my panties. I grab his hand and place it on my knee.

"Oh come on, baby. No one can see," whispers Cal. I can barely hear him over Noah, Sam and George's loud cacklin' from the balcony in the Colored Section.

I turn to tell Cal "no" for the hundredth time just as the film screen goes black and the names of the actors appear. We get up and head towards the doors and meet George, Noah and Sam outside.

"Common Clay was a great film," says George still munching on a bag of popcorn.

"Excellent! Excellent!" says Cal.

"How would you know? You were all on Sally the entire time. I watched you from the balcony," says Noah laughing. I cover my face with my hand completely embarrassed. I move my hand down to see a black guy come up to Sam. He whispers in his ear and leans into him for a hug. I see a gun in his hand that he places in the back of Sam's pants under his shirt. The guy moves back from Sam and runs off.

"Who was that?" I ask.

"Just an old buddy," says Sam. "Hey, George and Noah, wanna go to Brigg's house for a game of horseshoe? Cal, you and Sally are welcome to come, too, if you don't mind hanging with a bunch of us negros."

"We hang out with you, don't we?" says Cal. They all laugh as if they've said the funniest thing on earth.

"Cal and I have to go back to the university to prepare for his frat meeting," I explain.

"That's no meeting a woman should be at," says Noah.

"Well somebody has to clean up the room and put out the snacks," says Cal laughing. I stick my elbow in his stomach.

"I love you baby," he says kissing the top of my head.

Cal, Noah and George get into George's car.

"We'll see ya'll later," says Sam through the window. They pull off heading towards the negro side of town.

Cal and I continue walking down the sidewalk towards Middletown University.

"Is Sam in some sort of trouble?" I ask Cal.

"No. Why would you say that?"

I look back down the street as George's car was beginning to turn onto the next block. I can't help but worry. I've got a bad feeling in my gut.

**Mary Townsend**

*August 15, 1930 – 2:35 p.m.*

I hear three hard knocks at the door. I toss my yarn and needles into the basket beside the davenport and jump to my feet. I know it's Johnny! Nobody else ever comes to see me while mama and my sister, Mildred, are off to work. This is also the only time Johnny and I get to ourselves. We can never go to his house, because his daddy would hang me dead and make Johnny stand there and watch as

he did it. The only person in this world Johnny cares more about than his mama is me.

I unlock the door and Johnny bursts in; picking me up by the hips. His long legs and big arms twirl me around in a waltz dance. My cotton dress with flowers all over pops open under a breeze like flowers blooming in the springtime as he lifts me up and down. He gives me little pecker kisses all over my face and neck. He reaches my lips and breathes them into his mouth as he pulls my body into is and holds my waist so tight as if he were cradling a baby that might fall any second. I pull away a little and look into his eyes. Blue as the sky reflecting over the ocean. I rub my hands through his hair. Black and as greasy as tires on a car rolling through a puddle of oil.

"Johnny Thompson! What did I tell you about all this crud you put in your hair?" He laughs and gives me more pecker kisses on my cheeks. "I'm serious, Johnny!"

Johnny walks into the living room and takes a seat on the davenport and pats the other side for me to come sit with him. He takes my hand as I walk closer and closer to him then wraps his around my back as I wrap my legs around his waist and sit on lap. We sit face to face for a few minutes. No kissing. Not even any touching. Just his eyes meeting my eyes. His nose tip to tip with mine. My body against is. The moment is suddenly ruined when Johnny speaks again.

"So baby, what is it you need to tell me? Why aren't you feelin' well?" he says with a deep look of concern and wonder in his eyes. I stand up and pace back and forth; left to right in front of him. I think I was making the both of a nervous. Johnny stands to his feet and lifts me and softly lays me down on the floral carpet in the living room. He runs his hands from my ankles to the top of my thighs and whispers in my ear, "You know you can tell me anything, right?"

I know I can. I always have been. Johnny has been the rock of my life since I met him at Carter's Diner, but telling him this could make us stronger or tear us apart.

"Baby tell me what's wrong!!" Johnny yells as he sits up next to me on the floor. I sit up, too and look deep into his eyes.

"You're gonna be a papa, Johnny."

Johnny jumps to his feet. There's more fear on his face than there is excitement. I can't tell exactly what he's thinking, but it's nothing good.

"Well say somethin' Johnny."

"What do you want me to say? I'm excited. I am, but we're not married and it's illegal to married here in Indiana with you being colored and me White. And if my pa finds out, he'll hang us both from the tree in our front yard."

"What do you suppose we do? Keep it a secret?"

Johnny has both his hands gripping the sides of his head as he paces the room moving his elbows back and forth like a bird flapping its wings.

"Johnny, baby, please tell me what it is you're thinkin'?"

I begin to bite my nails; all the fingers on my right hand at once.

"I just...I just couldn't live with myself if something were to happen to you and our child. And my pa...he's evil."

"What...are...we...going...to do, Johnny?" I was starting to lose my patience. I need answers. Johnny sits back down next to me on the floor.

"I don't know what we're going to do." He puts his hand on my knee and

rubs it so hard my skin was turning red. He stares at the floor with a dark look on his face.

“What are you thinkin’?”

He slowly begins to speak with a tremble in his voice. “I keep thinking about when I was a kid. Not so long ago. I was 12. The klan was having a parade. My mom and some of the other klan wives dressed all in black and the kids were dressed in small white gowns and hoods like our fathers. My dad led the parade with me right by his side and even though not many words were said during the walk, all I could feel was hatred and anger. When we got to the front of the negro neighborhood; not far from where you live, they lit a line of crosses up right in front. My dad handed me one of the torches and said, “Son, one day you will lead our brothers in the fight to protect our nation and our race from these niggers.” I lit the cross. I had never felt such shame in my life. I don’t want my son or daughter growing up in a society...in a world seeing hate like that.”

Johnny places his arms around my shoulder and I can see in his eyes what he’s thinkin’ now.

“Baby, pack your bags we’re getting out of here. I gotta stop by the Navajo meeting and talk to Cal. Tell him to tell everybody we’re outta here. Then we leave.”

### **Noah Brooks**

*August 15, 1930 – 9:00 p.m.*

“Cold beers. Warm summer night. My lady’s parents are going to a movie in a little and I’m gonna mosey myself on over to her place. Can’t ask for more. The lord is good he is.” Briggs drinks the last of his beer and tosses it in the trash.

“Guess we better get on out of here, then. Wouldn’t want to keep you from your lady,” Sam says throwing a metal horseshoe at a small pole stuck in the dirt in Briggs’ yard. He misses. George and I finish off our beers and hand the bottles to Briggs.

“Tell your dad we’re sorry we drank the last of it,” I laugh.

“He won’t notice. The old man always thinks he drank the last of it. Man if he only knew. Mom thinks he has a drinking problem.”

We all laugh at Briggs as we open the gate at the back of his yard to get into George’s car.

“We’ll see ya later, Briggs. Tell your lady we said hiiiiiii,” Sam jokes.

Briggs pays us no never mind and shuts the gate. We hop into George’s car and pull off into the night.

“So like I was sayin’...” Sam starts off again talking about buying a new car. He must’ve been dreamin’. No money. No job. That means no car, but you couldn’t tell Sam that. No, you couldn’t get nothing through his thick head once he got started on something. “I’m gonna buy me one of those new Fords. It’s gonna be red and have some nice, shiny wheels. Too fine!”

George misses the turn for my street and keeps on driving straight towards Lover’s Avenue.

“Where you goin’ man?” I ask.

“Just drivin’,” he says not paying me any attention. He gives Sam a look and Sam has a smirk on his face like he’s about to go looking for trouble. My stomach was beginning to turn.

“Where the hell are we goin’?” I ask again.

“Well, I told ya...” George says, but I’m not hearing it.

“Don’t give me that shit. Why are you two giving each other looks like you’re up to something?”

They look at each other again. Both of ‘em got their eyebrows raised. Sam turns around and looks at me with a big smile on his face.

“You got any money?” he asks.

“Now you know I ain’t got any money.”

“Well, how about we get some,” he says pulling something from behind his shirt. He lifts his hand over the seat and is holding a gun. George turns his headlights off as we drive into Lover’s Avenue. There’s another car just ahead of us with two White folks in it; a boy and girl looking to be around our age.

“You know we can’t do this,” I say.

“Who says we can’t?” Sam still has that smile on his face. I almost think that he’s going crazy over having a new car.

“Man, my dad can get you a job driving for some White folks on the other side of town. You can get money that way, but this just ain’t right.” I put my hand on his shoulder to comfort him, but it only pisses him off. He takes my hand and places the gun in it.

“You scared ain’t ya, Sam?” Sam asks.

“And you’re not?” I ask back. “If we rob these White folks, we’ll never see the break of day again.”

“Calm down, Sam. We’ll get the money then leave town for a while. Wait till all the commotion is over with then come back,” says George. I can’t believe the words that are coming out of his mouth. The both of them were crazy.

“Don’t tell me you don’t need money or a car of your own. Don’t you get tired of George haulin’ us around everywhere?” says Sam.

I take a second to think. I did need some money. It would help mama and my little sisters out a lot.

“Ok,” I say giving in. “Let’s do this and get the hell outta dodge.”

George parks the car a few feet away from the White folks’ car. We get out and sneak up to ‘em. I put the gun through the open window and point it at this White man’s head.

“Give us your money!” The White man turns around and immediately I recognize him. He used to come to my old shoe shining stand a year ago. I put the gun down and hand it over to Sam, who’s standing right beside me. “I can’t do it.”

“Just get outta here. You ain’t no man. A man can handle business!” yells Sam. He points the gun back at the White man’s head. “Give us your money, your jewelry, everything! We want it all!”

I can’t believe this is really happening! Sam and George are really robbing these poor people. I take off running knowing in the back, front, and the sides of my head that nothin’ good was gonna come out of this. I headed for home, but before I could even get to the end of the street, I hear a gunshot. I run even faster with barely any breath in my lungs and without turning back.



**Cal Mulberry**

*August 15, 1930 – 10:00 p.m.*

“Has anybody seen Johnny? He’s never this late. Meeting started two hours ago.

“We haven’t seen him,” says James, one of my Navajo brothers. I look over at Sally, whose busy munching on a cookie and she shrugs her shoulder. This was so unlike Johnny. He was always early. Never late. Just as I begin to worry, Johnny bursts through the door. Sweat all over his face and a look of fear in his eyes. What surprises me even more is Mary is with him. He knows better than to bring her here. What is he thinkin’?

“What are you thinkin’ bringing her here man?” I ask. He shakes his head and grabs me by the shoulders. Sally walks over to us with the same look of worry on her face that I’m sure was on mine. He started talking fast.

“I was driving over here and saw a huge crowd running down to the courthouse. I stopped and asked one of the guys running there and he said they were going to hang Sam, George and Noah for robbing a White couple at Lover’s Avenue.”

“We gotta get over there, but Mary can’t go. They’ll hang her, too,” I try to explain.

“I’m going. They are my friends,” she argues.

“Mary. Johnny. You gotta listen. This ain’t nothin’ to fool around with.” I can see in Johnny’s eyes that he knows I’m right.

“There’s something else I gotta tell you,” he says. He whispers in my ear, “Mary and I are getting out of here. Leaving town.”

I pull away from him. “What?”

“Mary’s having a baby,” he whispers even softer than before. I look over at Sally. She’s talking to Mary, but she turns and looks at me like she already knows what’s going on. I hope I’m wrong. Why would she keep this from me?

“Enough talking. We gotta get to the courthouse and save Noah, George and Sam,” says Sally. I grab my red, leather Navajo jacket from a chair and we take off running for the courthouse.

**George Downs**

*August 15, 1930 – 11:00 p.m. Courthouse*

They got us sitting here in a room. I can see people from the window gathering outside with pitchforks and torches. I know something bad is going to happen. I just don’t how bad this something is.

Two White officers open the door and throw Noah in here with us. I was hoping that he had gotten home and away from all this, but they got him. They push him to the floor and shut the door.

“What’s going on man? What are they doing out?” I ask in a panic. Sweat rolling down my face.

“They say the man you shot is dead and you raped the girl?” he asks.

“Now you know we wouldn’t rape no girl,” says Sam.

“But you killed a man?” Noah asks again. I bow my head in shame.

“We didn’t mean to kill him. When the gun went off...I just...”

“It wasn’t nothin’ we could do,” says Sam. “But we really didn’t mean to kill. He was hasslin’ us about the money.”

I stand up and pace the cell. Everything that happened tonight running

through my head. I can't believe things got so bad so quick. My ma and pa are gonna tear to pieces when they find out that their son was hung for robbin' and murderin' a man and rapin' a girl that we rape. My life is over. It's all done. I can hang up startin' my own business and getting' the hell outta Middletown. I can hang up startin' a family of my own and growin' old with my wife and grandchildren. It's all done.

Another White officer, the two White officers from before that threw Noah in here, and a klansman opens the door. The klansman takes off his hood. It's Johnny's father.

"You dem niggers that been runnin' around with my son I hear. Say you were with him at the confectionary before you decided to rob and kill that man and rape that girl," he has a smirk on his face the entire time he's talking. I can't tell if he thought what we did was funny or if he thought we were lying about being with Johnny. "Well, you won't be hangin' with my boy no more after tonight, but you will be hangin' from that tree out front. Grab 'em boys!"

They take us by the arms. We kick and scream. Hold on to each other trying to stop 'em from taking us. One of the officers starts hitting us with a billy club. They rip our clothes up and our shoes come off as they drag us down the halls of the courthouse. One of the officers pulls Sam's hat off his head and throws it in the trashcan we pass by as we reach the front doors of the courthouse.

### ***Sam Reese***

*August 16, 2015 – 12:00 a.m*

"Ahh!" My barefeet scrape the concrete steps of the courthouse as the officers drag us down and hand us off to five White men in the crowd. They go back inside the courthouse. One of the White men hits me. I can taste blood in my mouth, but I can't imagine it'll be half as painful as the rope that's going to go around my neck. Oh Lord, what have I done? Oh Lord, forgive me! Hear me cry! Hear my cry! Please save us. Please let them let us go. Give us another chance.

I look through the cracks in the crowd and can see a new Ford convertible that's parked on the corner of the street. I didn't even feel the want I always felt when I saw that car. Seeing that car only made me want for life more than anything. It wasn't worth and I wish I could go back and feel that way earlier. I wish I would've listened to Noah when he tried to talk some sense into me. We should've went on home instead of going to Lover's Avenue. I never should've got that gun and I never should've robbed and shot that man. Oh Lord, I'm so sorry! Please forgive me and my friends for what we've done tonight. Even if I don't live to see another day, I hope I live to spend eternity with you.

They throw three ropes over the tree. I can hear the ropes get tight and scrape some of the bark off of the tree that falls over our heads. Someone in the crowd yells. A woman. She tells them to let the one on the end go. Closing my eyes and praying that I'm that one, I open them to see that I'm the one in the middle. A part of me is heart wrenched, but another part of me is happy that Noah is getting away. He doesn't deserve any of this. He ran away. George and I stayed.

They put the ropes around our necks and tighten them so tight, I can barely breathe. But that didn't matter. Not anymore anyhow.

George and I cry out loud. God, please! Please! I see Mary and Johnny in the crowd as well as Cal and Sally. Johnny is staring up at one of the window.

Mary is crying in his arms. Sally and Cal make their way up to us. Tears in both of their eyes. Sally touches both George and my face and mouths, "I love you. I wish we could help."

"I'm so sorry man! I'm so sorry!" Cal begins to break down. I hush him and tell him to get out of here.

"Just go! It's ok. It's ok. I love you, too," I say. "I love..."

The ropes pull us up into the branches of the tree. God, pl...

### ***Johnny Thompson***

*August 16, 1940*

It's the tenth anniversary of Sam and George's death. Mary and I always said we would never come back here again, but we drove from New Mexico, because we thought it was time to show our 10-year-old son, George Samuel and our 5-year-old daughter, Jonetta where they came from. I won't take them to my family's house, of course, but it's about time they meet Mary's folks.

We get off the highway and right off I head over to the courthouse. I park my car right on the corner a few feet away from where the big oak tree used to stand. It was cut down now. And it's right that it should be.

Mary and I get out of the car. I can see tears beginning to form in her eyes as she looks at the spot where our friends were hung. George and Samantha stand next to me. I look down into their blue eyes that look just like mine when I was their ages and kiss their curly dark hair. I look into their light brown faces and see confusion.

"Why are we here, daddy? I thought you were taking us to the Confectionary," says George.

"In a bit, son. There's something I want you to see. Something I have to tell you two that you need to know about. Walk with me and your mother." Mary and I walk them over to where the tree stood and we all sit down. Mary has two bouquets of roses she lays down. She turns to our kids and tells them the story of the day we lost our friends Sam and George and every sliver of hope, but how we gained new and better lives once we left this place called Middletown.

# Headlights

Hannah Vollmer

(1932)

June Schaefer was suffocating. The blood covered her arms, weighed down her cotton dress, smudged the pores on her face. It was her blood, but not from her body. It was full of her DNA, full of similar white blood cells, but it was not her blood. It was her twin's blood, who was laying underneath a tree, dead. But she felt as if she was the one who had been bleeding out, blood filling her lungs, the heat pushing down on her chest as the blood trailed over her limbs.

Her feet caught on the underbrush of the forest floor, and she skidded to a halt, further covering her body in filth. She tried to brush leaves off of her face, but they only stuck to her hands. She forced herself not to think about it, only about the road, the road that would surely appear if she ran far enough. From there she could get help. She shoved off of the ground and started to run, listening for sounds of traffic, cars that she could flag down as they passed by. On a night like tonight people would be drawn out of their homes, taking Central Avenue out to the dance hall in the next town over or the county baseball games that often occurred on summer nights.

She fell out of the woods, Central Avenue before her, but couldn't see any traffic headed her way. The darkness that surrounded her was different from any she had experienced; it was as if the heat had suffocated everything around her, the wind not daring to make any noise through the trees, the katydids and the crickets squished beneath the humidity, her ragged breathing sounding out of place in the country night.

"C'mon June. You gotta find a way out. Gotta find a way out," she muttered to herself, looking both ways. Which way was town? Her head buzzed, disoriented by the pounding in her temples. A desperate cry escaped her lips, a whine that floated up towards the moon, a call that would remain unanswered as long as she stayed where she was.

"Keep it together, girl," she told herself as she hurried down the road. Bugs were starting to swarm around her, attracted to the sticky substance that covered her body. She slapped at them, annoyed. There was still no one coming down the road. Where the hell was the traffic? The moon was high, lighting up the road like a giant street light, a silver glow coming off of the gravel, shimmering stars similar to those that dotted the darkness above her. A car wouldn't be able to miss

her with as bright as it was. She slowed her pace, looking back often for a sign of headlights. She covered her face in her hands, stained with her brother's blood.

She couldn't tell if it was sweat or tears running down her face as she sat in the middle of the road, tucking her dress beneath her as if she were sitting in front of a crowd. She looked both ways, but there weren't any headlights to be seen on the horizon, no familiar hum of the Chevy's and Fords that buzzed around town. It was mute—she would be able to hear a car coming from two miles out, just like Jimmy taught her.

It had been a slow morning in the office, Joss Lund barely touching the most recent case he had been assigned. Some girl had poisoned herself after being abducted; family wanted justice. But Lund had hit a dead end, chain smoking until his lunch hour. As he was walking out the door to head to the corner diner, his phone rang. It was Johnson, practically begging.

"She was found along Central Ave, in the middle of the night, her brother strung up. Carey thinks it's the niggers." Johnson told him.

"So what's the problem? Sounds like a closed case." Lund swiveled in his office chair.

"It's not. It's Jimmy Schaefer."

"Who's Jimmy Schaefer?" He looked out the window, uninterested.

"The most well-liked kid in town. Even the negroes adore him. This isn't something that can be written off." Johnson argued.

Lund drove in his Ford, the late afternoon sun glaring in his eyes as he drove towards Middletown. He tucked his eyes under the brim of his hat, trying to avoid the sun's gaze. There was a nice breeze coming in through his window, despite the August heat. But that's where the niceties stopped. The trees that lined the road stood guard, making Lund feel like he was already being judged. He pulled out a cigarette—his memories of Middletown weren't good. He had been called because of his expertise on the other case, but didn't have much hope for a better outcome.

Sometimes the two young bodies hanging from the courthouse trees frequented his dreams, running after him as he tried to move forward. Those boys hadn't received justice, and there wasn't anything just about this town. He had wanted nothing to do with Middletown after the lynching, directing calls from that part of the state towards other detectives. He wasn't the only detective in the state of Indiana who cared about right and wrong, but sometimes it sure felt like it. As far as Lund was concerned, the morals of a man far outweighed his color. Unfortunately, the majority of people in Indiana didn't agree with him. The people of Middletown were more than heathens, taking matters into their hand when and where they saw fit. But he couldn't ignore a call from a concerned officer, pleading with him to come out and investigate this murder case. It wasn't exactly an invitation, but he was curious. A kid is found hanging from a tree, his sister found in the road? And no witnesses. Had the Negroes in Middletown strung up the Schaeffer boy to exact revenge? Detective Lund didn't think so, but this Lt. Johnson was adamant about the strangeness of it all.

He was brought out of his thoughts by something running out in front of him. He slammed on his brakes, his wheels squealing on the pavement. He climbed out of his car, standing in the middle of the road looking for whatever darted in front of him. As he searched, he noticed how secluded this patch of the

road was. And then he remembered what Johnson had told him.

They hadn't been sure if June was alive or dead in the road.

Lawrence Christenson was coming up fast when he saw the heap in the road, a blob of white against the pavement. He slammed on his brakes and turned hard, sliding to the shoulder. His heart was thrashing against his ribcage. He looked at the road, where the heap was lying. He hadn't hit something right? He jumped out of his car, second guessing himself. The blob did not stir on the road. He crept closer. Again, he second-guessed himself—this thing was covered in blood. Was he certain that he hadn't clipped it?

"My god," he uttered as he realized that it was a girl, a young woman, lying in the road. What the hell was she doing out here? She stirred, a head rising off of the pavement.

"Miss, are you alright?" The girl was weak, barely able to push herself up off of the hot road. Her arms shook as she held herself up, her head swinging from side to side, then limply drooping towards the ground. He towered over her, casting her face into shadow. He pulled her off of the ground, letting go when he realized that the blood was still wet.

"Are you alright?"

"Jimmy," she whined, her eyes fluttering open to look at him. "Please... Jimmy."

Lawrence picked her up, realizing who it was, and hurried over to his car. After placing her in the passenger seat, and covering the wounds around her hands he sped off in the direction of Middletown General.

"What happened to you?" he almost yelled as he raced towards the first lights of the city.

"Jimmy," was her reply.

"What about Jimmy?"

Her hands were shaking, blood running free from the cuts around her wrists. "You...you have to help him."

"What happened to him?" Lawrence slammed on the brakes as the traffic light turned from green to red. She only shook her head, slowly as if she was confused.

"They...they..." her voice cracked, tears running down her face. "He's..."

A car honked, making Lund jump in the road. He turned, seeing a delivery truck behind him. He touched the brim of his hat, walking back towards his vehicle. The horn honked again, an agitated rhythm echoing through the trees.

"C'mon, flatfoot, I'm on a tight schedule!" the man behind the wheel yelled.

Lund waved him around, watching the truck speed down the road. He scowled as he climbed back into his car. He hated having to come back for the second time. He started down the road, unsure if the outcome of this case would be any better than two years ago.

Jimmy had thought the idea was stupid. They were too old to go swimming at Hank's family's lake. If you could call it that—it was more of a hole in the ground, one lone tree standing guard with a rope as its only weapon. He turned to see Gene and Dick throwing sticks, Charlie looking up at the evening

sky through the trees, and Hank with his arm slung around June's shoulders. He frowned, stomping forward.

"June," he called out, picking up a pebble and throwing it through the tree branches. It ricocheted off them, sending snaps of anger through the trees, just like the anger that was snapping in his chest.

"What?" she called back, giggling at something Hank had said.

"Get up here," he ordered, without looking back. It fell silent. "June!"

She rushed up towards him, walking alongside him silently, knowing that she was about to be chastised. She started to say something several times, a protest, an explanation maybe, but she stopped herself each time, silenced by her brother's set jaw.

"What did I tell you about staying away from Hank?" he said, a low growl amongst the cicadas and the katydids, the other creatures of the forest scared into submission.

"Jimmy—" she started, crossing her arms. He looked towards her, his frustration fizzing down from his chest. She was pouting, her lower lip starting to quiver.

"I deserve to be happy too."

You deserve better than Hank, he thought as he looked back towards the group of guys trailing behind them. They were farther back than he thought, talking amongst themselves, Hank frequently looking towards June. Jimmy rolled his eyes, slinging his arm around his sister's shoulders.

"I just don't want you to settle, that's all. I just think—"

"You can think when you're at MU this fall. Let's just have fun ok? Before summer's over and we all have to grow up?" She mumbled, looking out at the shadows that fell through the trees, creeping in on their conversation, stalking them as they neared the secluded water and away from the road.

"Hey Gene! Where'd ya say those Marion skirts were meeting us?" He turned, but the fellas were nowhere to be found. Suddenly, he was pushed forward, something pulled over his head. He swung his arms, trying to fight off whatever was around him. He fell to the ground, his arms wrenched behind his back. He could hear June screaming.

June didn't look up when Lund entered the room. She was staring out the window, her wrists bandaged, clothed in a white hospital gown, scrubbed clean of the blood that had covered her body when he had first encountered her. But her face was still smudged with dirt and tears, a reminder to every one of the hell that she had encountered. Her father slept next to her in a chair. It was almost as if she was transfixed on something outside, something miles away, something that she couldn't get rid of.

"Miss Schaefer, I'm Detective Joss Lund. He started, folding his jacket over the back of the other chair in the room. She didn't respond.

"June?"

The authorities had told him that June was in shock, thrown into silence by the traumatic experience she had gone the night before. But as Lund watched her stare out the window, he noticed how strong her gaze was. Despite her shaken appearance, she looked collected. She was silent, but composed—she didn't seem upset at all. Accepting of the fate that had befallen her brother sure, but not



scared into silence. From what he had pulled from the cops, she had hopes of going to Middletown University in the fall, to pursue a career in teaching. But the Schaefers only had enough funds to send one child to school, and Jimmy had already been awarded a scholarship for MU. She had spent the summer, working in her father's store, and spending time with her mother, joining the Quilter's Club, and running the Sunday school at the local Lutheran Church. She had slowly been absorbed into the feminine culture for girls who had no hope of continuing their education. There was a rumor that Hank Rodgers, the supposed steady of June, would propose before the end of the year.

No, she didn't look like a prisoner of fear. She looked more like a slave to Society, a girl that had been robbed of her dreams and was silently suffering as she smiled for the crowd.

"Is he dead?"

Lund blinked back into the present, out of his mental notebook, where his thoughts were being echoed in the room. June was staring at him, picking at the bandages around her wrists. Her eyes, though bloodshot, and red from crying, were piercing him in the small room. Lund shook his head.

"I'm not--" He scratched the back of his head with his pencil. "Mind if I ask you some questions?"

She turned her head again, staring at the window. He knew that was all he was going to get out of her—for now anyways. The struggle with this girl was just beginning; and unfortunately she had the upper hand. But Lund couldn't make himself leave. There was something about this girl that was intriguing. Her father stirred in his seat, a growl of a snore escaping before he sat up in his chair. Lund nodded, grabbed his coat and headed back into the hallway.

They found Jimmy's body that morning.

The authorities finally got enough coherent details out of June to start looking in the woods off of Central Avenue. He was hanging from a tree, noose tied tightly around his neck. He had been shot twice—once in the chest, once in the stomach—most likely by shotgun. They weren't sure if he was shot or hung first. A black pillowcase was covering his head, and when they removed it his eyes stared back at them, wide open, to the darkness around him.

"Cut him down," Bill Carey, police chief of the Middletown force, ordered. He puffed on a cigar, frowning as he looked around the scene. The water was shimmering in the early morning light, the search dogs tied to a nearby tree, tongues hanging out, trying to relieve themselves from the tiring search. "Think you can handle that, Johnson?"

Lt. Mark Johnson nodded grimly and started towards the large tree. He motioned for two other officers to help him, pulling out a large pocket knife from his belt. It was one time, he thought angrily back to the time he had dropped a body as they were carrying it from the crime scene. He had been new to town, and right out of the academy—but Carey never forgot it. Now, whenever he was given a task, the phrase "Think you can handle it, Johnson?" followed. The other guys on the force dared not to chime in, for fear that Carey would come after them next. So they all obediently started towards the tree, while Carey's precious hounds spread out underneath the shade.

Jimmy's neck was bruised, his head hanging at an unnatural angle, and there

was a stench that Mark and the other officers couldn't get out of their noses. Some retched, some swallowed hard, and all used handkerchiefs to cover the smell as they watched the body drop from the branches above them. It hit the ground with a thump, hollow and soft, the crickets pausing in a moment of silence before once again greeting the first rays of sunlight.

"Poor kid," one of the other officers mumbled. No one moved towards or from the body, silently giving their respects to the dead man in front of them.

"Hurry up, over there!" Carey bellowed, his cigar clenched in his teeth. But still the other blues did not move, afraid to move forward with procedure.

"Who could've done this to Jimmy and lived with themselves?" Frank Earnhardt, one of the older guys in the company, asked.

"Didn't deserve this," another among them muttered. They all kicked at the ground around the tree.

"I said hurry up!" Carey's voice carried from the foliage yards away, where he leaned against a trunk, puffing on a new cigar in the shade.

"I'd like to see him get his ass over here and deal with this kid." Earnhardt grumbled, motioning for Johnson to grab the stretcher tilted against the trunk. They lifted Jimmy's disfigured body onto the stretcher and started for the coroner's car.

"Anybody got any ideas on where we start looking?" Deputy Eugene Rican asked as Earnhardt and Johnson passed the big dogs that ran the station, and the town. Sure there was a mayor, but as far as the citizens were concerned, this was Carey's town. He would take care of them—he was just. They could overlook his drinking problem, his hatred and eagerness to blame every violent act on the blacks; as long as they could sleep at night they didn't care.

"This looks like something that happened in June, when those damn niggers whipped that kid that was trespassing," Someone murmured.

"This was definitely a retaliation against the white community," Carey chimed in, talking through his teeth clenching his cigar.

Johnson bristled. "You can't be sure of that, sir."

"What makes you think it's anything else? It's happened before," Carey challenged, pushing his chest out, as if he was guarding his territory.

"I don't think we can rule this retaliation until we get more out of June," he argued, heading towards the coroner's car.

"You just better watch your step, boy. Wouldn't want you to trip and make the evidence unusable." Carey winked at him, pulling out another cigar from his pocket.

Earnhardt shrugged at Johnson as they headed towards the woods. "That bastard could've killed this kid himself and the town would still love him. God help us.

Jimmy couldn't believe he had won.

He had applied last minute, not even sure if he wanted to attend Middletown University. He hadn't told his parents, his friends, especially not June. He wanted to keep his options open, that's all. Mrs. Miller clapped loudly as she repeated his name over the intercom in the Middletown High gymnasium, waiting for him to come up on the stage. He sat dumbfounded, between Hank and June, not knowing what to do. He didn't notice June's confused look, as if she was waiting for

Mrs. Miller to correct herself.

“God help us, you’re going to college,” Hank laughed, shoving him out of his seat. “Well go on.”

Jimmy stumbled from his seat in the bleachers towards the stage. The crowd only seemed to roar louder as he climbed up the small steps. The sun shining in from the windows seemed to follow him, creating a natural spotlight that followed his movements as he shook her hand. His heart swelled in his chest, growing prouder by the minute. He waved to the crowd, thanking them, the town, for once again believing in him. He peered around the room, looking for his parents. Instead he locked eyes with June, who was clapping and smiling at him, tears dotting her eyes.

The police told Lund they didn’t find the weapon or anything that could lead them to a suspect. Their only witness was June, and she wasn’t speaking to anyone. The following morning she was released from the hospital and taken home. She had also refused to talk to Lund,, watching him from the window as Lucille, her mother, informed him that she wasn’t taking any visitors. With nothing else to do, and with his room at the Hotel Roberts not ready yet, he drove out to where he had found June, and stumbled along through the forest.

It was unbearably sticky as he walked, shedding his jacket minutes into the trek. He checked the road, wanting to make sure he didn’t wander too far from his car. He was unsure of how far June had wandered that night, but the blues that had he spoken to assured him it wasn’t too far into the woods. However, he soon lost sight of his car, the shade from the branches above blocking not only the sunlight, but any sort of breeze that could have helped make the hunting more pleasant. As he stumbled along, he couldn’t fathom why the Schaefers were even out here. Where had they been going? Why so late at night?

Lund had travelled farther into the woods than expected, sweating profusely in the August heat. He grabbed a handkerchief and patted his forehead, but could not escape the feeling of entrapment among the leaves. The branches seemed to swing lower and lower, until he finally decided to sit beneath one of the large elms, waving his large brimmed hat in front of his face. From here he could see the oak where Jimmy hung, the tree looming in his eyesight. His heart was struck with a melancholy feeling, one he tried to chain back into the depths of his heart. As he swung his hat back and forth, he noticed a specific smell, one not natural to the forest. It smelled like burnt metal, as if charcoal was smoldering beneath his feet. He pushed himself away from the tree, coming away with a hand covered in black powder. Lund rubbed his fingers together squinting.

It looked ordinary enough, a large sturdy trunk spouting branches into the heavens, reaching for desires that couldn’t be tamed by the earth. Why had he stopped? On closer inspection he found black gunpowder residue, and two names cut into the trunk. There was moss starting to grow around it, the names receding back into nature. He dug out the pocket knife from his trousers, pushing away the growth. JS and HR. Who was HR? Jimmy Schaefer—and who? He wrote this in his notebook, chewing on his pencil as he squinted in the shade. He looked around the roots, but nothing was out of the ordinary there. There had not been a body here.

Whoever had killed Jimmy Schaefer, had moved him to hide this fact. And

the authorities hadn't even noticed.

Jimmy broke his hand the first time he caught them together. He was walking Ruth Christenson home and they were cutting it close to her curfew, pausing to pull each other into dark alleys, to spend a few dark moments together in the late July heat. Ruth was a bit too excitable for Jimmy's taste, but he knew that his parents liked her and her parents adored him. He might as well and try to have as much fun with her as he could.

"Jimmy," she whispered into his ear as he kissed her neck. "Oh baby—"

Jimmy tried to ignore her, but she kept whispering into his ear, as if she were Helen Hayes or something. He sighed, pulling away from her.

"Ruth, be a doll and quit beatin' my gums ok?" He ran a hand through his hair, it sticking up in the early summer heat.

"I'm sorry, baby." She pulled him to her by his suspenders, pressing their foreheads together. "I don't want to go home tonight. Let's get outta here."

Jimmy laughed. Dames were just too easy to please. They were too giddy, ponies that wanted to run before they were out of the gate. He shook his head, and wrapped his arms around her. "Not tonight. Your folks would kill me."

"Not if they can't find us," she said, pulling him deeper into the alley behind Schaefer's General Store. The lamplight receded, and no one would be able to see them from the sidewalk. Ruth and Jimmy got lost in each other, his hair becoming even messier, her blouse becoming untucked. They were rebels and explorers of the night, discovering themselves and each other in the summer shadow.

Their moment was interrupted by a girl's high laugh, echoing down the alleyway. There were footsteps approaching. Jimmy pushed Ruth towards the wall, peering into the dark street. They wouldn't be caught, but could creep in on whoever was strolling down this way.

"Hank Rodgers, I told you this bank was closed. Now stop or I'll have to explain to my brother why I have a bruise on my neck!" the girl giggled. "Hank!"

Jimmy smirked; Hank was such a dog. He and Jimmy shared many things, including their ability to charm a girl with just about anything. They could make fishing in his family's lake sound like the most romantic outing available to a Midwest gal. Who was he out with tonight?

"Who is—" Ruth started. Jimmy covered her mouth with his hand, sending a glare her way. She stared up at him regretfully.

Hank and his gal came into view, shadows against the streetlamps of Jackson St. He pulled her towards him, but she pushed him away. They struggled against each other, but Hank won, picked her up, swinging her out towards the street. She screamed loudly, grabbing onto his neck. He laughed at her dramatics, putting her down underneath the streetlamp. He kissed her, keeping their faces hidden from Jimmy and Ruth, still spying in the alleyway. Jimmy grinned; he couldn't wait to heckle Hank about this the next day after church.

"Hank, you're becoming a sap ya know that?" the girl said. Jimmy knew that voice—the teasing tone she used familiar—but who was it? "I'm gonna have to tell all your friends that you're not the dog you used to be."

"Go ahead. I don't care." He kissed her again, but after a moment, she slapped his chest playfully.

"I'm calling your bluff," the girl teased. "You're not ready for such a reputa-

tion!”

“You’re so full of it,” he replied, the duo starting down the walk again. Jimmy and Ruth crept farther towards the street, hoping not to lose the conversation.

Hank and the dame stopped, the street empty around them. He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. What a sap, Jimmy thought to himself, laughing. Hank was grinning from ear to ear; even from the shadows it was obvious.

“How’d I ever get stuck on you, June?”

Jimmy stiffened. He had heard wrong; his best friend was not out necking with his sister. June didn’t date anyone. Never had. Or so he thought. He pushed away from the wall and followed them, dragging Ruth along by the hand.

He watched them as they held hands, a fire exploding inside his chest. Jimmy had made it clear to all his friends that June was off limits—she deserved better than any of those goofs. Especially Hank. When Hank reached for a cigarette from his shirt pocket Jimmy said, “Need a light?”

“That’d be great, bud.” Hank looked towards him, and froze. June’s expression changed from smiling to somber in a matter of milliseconds. “Jimmy. Ruth.”

Ruth tried to tug Jimmy past them, struggling to move two feet. The tension between the three of them was thick, a humidity that made it hard to breathe, one that made the girls look at each other with high eyebrows.

“Jimmy, I don’t want any trouble. I’m already late, I don’t need—”

“Dry up, Ruth. Take my sister home, with ya.” Jimmy snapped.

“Lay off, Jimmy. Your sister can choose who she wants to spend her Saturday nights with.” Hank challenged back, wrapping his arm around June’s waist.

“Jimmy,” June said. Her voice was shaking, but her eyes were steady, glinting at him like headlights in the night.

“Go home, June.”

“No,” she snapped.

“Go home, June!” her brother barked. Ruth stood awkwardly between the Schaefer twins, unsure of what to do.

“Go on, toots,” Hank told June. “I’ll call you sometime soon, eh?”

He kissed her on the forehead, pulling her close, whispering something Jimmy couldn’t make out. He charged and tackled Hank to the ground. June tried to pull him off as the two scuffled along the sidewalk, but he only pushed her away.

“Boys! Knock it off!” June hollered, tugging on one of their shoulders. She was knocked to the ground, hitting the back of her head on the base of the street lamp. She grimaced in pain, touching the back of her head.

She struggled to stand, glaring at Ruth. Ruth watched horrified as Jimmy and Hank rolled around on the sidewalk. She opened her mouth to speak more than once, only to just cover it with both of her hands.

“Oh, Ruth, quit being such a baby. You could try to help.” June pulled her hair back from her face. A smudge of red dashed her cheek. Ruth looked like she was going to faint.

Jimmy got in a few good punches before Hank turned on him. Hank was stronger and faster, but Jimmy had gotten in enough punches to mess up that pretty face of his. His nose was bleeding and there was a shiner already forming underneath his right eye.

“Boys! Stop it!” June started in again, Ruth on the edge of fleeing home

alone.

Hank paused over Jimmy, eager for revenge. He pulled his fist back, but June screamed in protest. He looked at her, as if waking up from a dream.

"Go ahead, hit me." Jimmy challenged. He pushed Hank hard, hoping that he wouldn't listen to June. That he would pummel him, the two having to explain why they were so bloodied up for the sermon tomorrow.

But instead Hank pulled him up and pushed him towards Adams Street.

"Beat it, Jimmy." Hank spat blood into the street. "And don't give June any grief or I will hit you."

June started after him, but Jimmy grabbed her arm. He let go, swinging his bloodied hand in pain. "You're not allowed to see him again, ya hear me? Stay away from him."

Jimmy looked around for Ruth, but she had run off. He sighed, and started off in the direction of the Christensons. June watched him go, alone under the streetlamp, frustration welling up in her chest. Once again, Jimmy hadn't gotten away with something, coming out as the top dog. And she had conceded, if only to stop him from hurting Hank more. Angry tears dotted her eyes and she hastily swiped at them, hoping Jimmy wouldn't turn around. She crossed her arms and waited until he disappeared, before crossing the street towards home.

Lucille Schaefer looked sadly at the man who was standing before her, outside of her daughter's hospital room. His peppered hair was unruly, most likely from him running a hand through it as the authorities quizzed him. His collar was unbuttoned, his jacket slung over one of the chairs in the hallway.

"Are you the one that is here to help my daughter?"

"Yes ma'am. I'm Detective Joss Lund. I'm—"

"You're the one they brought in about that lynchin' case a few years back."

A man approached the duo, wiping a handkerchief across his face in the August heat. He put the cloth back into his shirt pocket, wrapping his arm around Lucille. His face was set into a tight line, straighter than the linoleum tiles on the hospital floor "Bunch of nonsense if you ask me."

"I'm sorry to hear about your son, Mr. Schaefer." He held out a hand to the man who had suddenly turned more solemn than what he had been on approach.

"Call me Oliver." He paused a moment before taking Lund's hand. Lund thought about what the officers had told him about the Schaefer family. Oliver owned the biggest general store in Delaware County, was a member of the Sportmans Club, and was one of the only stores in town that closed on Sundays, no exceptions. His wife Lucille was a part of the Lutheran Quilter's club and was one of the best midwives in Northern Indiana. Their children were both well-liked and the most well-behaved kids in Middletown.

Oliver cleared his throat loudly, knocking Joss back into the hallway.

"You here to find the bastards who did this?" His voice cracked as the words left his mouth. It took him a moment to compose himself, Lucille leaning into him weakly, wringing the white gloves in her hands, the ones that she had dropped three times before she finally walked over to Joss as he went over the notes he had written from his own observations. The authorities weren't including him in their initial investigation, even though he had more experience than any of the collars here.

He tried not to fix an impression on the two people standing in front of him. But the people who he had met two years ago weren't very courteous to him, and had wanted nothing to do with him, nor the State. He had left Middletown regretful and scorned, that small towns were worse than the mob at protecting their own. Once a townie, always a townie. And nothing was going to change that.

"Mr. Lund?" Oliver questioned again, looking at Lund. He slowly nodded, hoping that this distraught father wouldn't attack him, accusing him of only investigating this case to boost his own career. It hadn't been unheard of, and after the way this town had displayed the mob mentality with the other case, he almost expected it. But the sorrowful man in front of him just nodded, kissed his wife's head, and headed into his daughter's room.

"You'll have to forgive Oliver, Mr. Lund. He just..." she trailed off, distracted by something happening down the hallway. "He's normally good with words, but this...this hit us hard."

Someone approached them, a man in a neat black suit, flower next to his handkerchief, extending his hand towards Lucille. "Mrs. Schaefer, I'm Donald Brookley of the Brookley Funeral Home. I'm so sorry to hear about your son."

Lucille reached out to him, Donald taking her hand and patting it with his other hand. He had a soft smile, with a sincere shine in his eyes, one that only people who dealt with the dead could have. His dark hair was combed over neatly, and he began to murmur to her softly. Lucille looked warily over at Lund. He nodded, and excused himself, returning to his post at the chair where his jacket and hat lay. He flipped open his notes, shortly taken after they arrived at the hospital:

Female, June Schaefer 18, covered in brother's blood (Jimmy Schaefer)  
Found in the middle of nowhere  
Male, James Schaefer, also 18, dead??  
Who else was with them?  
What sort of trouble were they in?

June flew into the girl's bathroom of the gymnasium, locking the door shut behind her. She rushed to the sink, cranking the faucet, splashing water on her face to wake her up from this nightmare. She had to wake up; Jimmy hadn't applied to MU. He didn't want to go—how many times had he said that college was for soft-handed men? He was looking forward to working in Daddy's store.

The doorknob rattled.

This was all a joke... a cruel end of the year joke. Jimmy had wanted her to go to school—he knew she had the smarts and how much she wanted to get out of Middletown.

Someone knocked on the door.

She grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser, wiping her dripping her face, a mixture of tap water and tears. She scrubbed her skin, cleaning the smudged makeup off of her face.

But now she was going to be stuck here. Her parents were never going to send both of them to school. They didn't have the money. Her heart pounded, rattling her ribcage. The lights were too bright, her vision blurring, as if she was going to faint. She couldn't catch her breath, as if her brother's future self was suffocating her with his hands. She was going to be stuck here forever. She

would never get out.

Hank Rodgers paced below June's window, waiting for her to respond. He threw another pebble, the tick of the glass amplifying against the silence around him. A shadow crossed in front of the window, and then disappeared.

"C'mon June," He whispered under his breath, looking both ways before creeping towards the front porch. He paused near the front steps, listening for the click of the door.

"June, c'mon toots. Quit playing around. I know you're--"

The door cracked, June slipping out, letting the door ease shut behind her. She crossed her arms, leaning against the paneling of the house. Hank moved towards her, but she slid away.

"What do you want Hank?" She whispered, her eyes appearing bright in the shadows of the porch.

"How are you? The town's gone nuts." He ran a hand through his hair.

"You didn't expect that to happen?" June's voice was harsh, her arms wrapped tightly around her. "You do remember who died right?"

Hank shook his head. "How're your folks? They holding up ok?"

He saw her shrug in the moonlight. "I guess. Honestly we aren't all together much. Now that Jimmy's gone...they aren't the same."

"And you?" Hank nervously clapped his hands together, staring out at the street.

June smirked. "I haven't been the same for quite some time. But we both know that." She didn't ask how he was. She knew—he had regretted the decision they made. He was second-guessing his loyalty to her. He was scared.

"Look, Hank, if you can't take this, maybe—"

"I can handle it," he protested, pointing a finger at her. "Who says I can't handle it?"

"You're a wreck," she replied, swaying out to lean on the porch swing. "You've practically got guilty all over your face."

"My best friend's dead. How am I supposed to react, June?" He grabbed her by the elbow, making her stare into his eyes. They were bloodshot, red, as if he had been crying. Hard.

"How can you say--?"

"Look, fella. Whether or not we want to admit, Jimmy's dead. Nothing's gonna change that." She held his hands in hers, running her painted nails over his veiny hands. "So we've got two options."

"What's that?" Hank's shoulders unhunched, finally relaxing in her grasp.

"We can grieve and move forward or we can let this define our lives." She brushed some fallen hair out of his eyes, smiling up at him. "So what's it gonna be, Hank?"

Hank paused, holding his breath. He leaned in, kissed her lightly, and then snuck down the stairs and into the night.

Lund tried not to look impatient as he listened to the locals rattle on about Jimmy. All that he could get out of these people was that the kid was well-liked. No one could say a cross word against Jimmy Schaefer, much less name anyone who would have been sore with him.



Lawrence Christenson, a local business owner, came to Lund the day of Jimmy's funeral. The man told tale after tale about the boy's good Samaritan ways, of how "well-liked" he was. Lund, however, didn't like Christenson; he was loud, smoked like a dwindling fire, a small trail of smoke wisping from his bottom lip as he puffed, and smacked the table when he wanted to make a point. "Jimmy Schaefer was one of the only kids I'd trust my life with. He was an honest, genuine human being. You didn't have to worry about him trying to weasel you out of a deal or nuthin' of the kind. My daughter went out with him a couple of times. I didn't even sit outside with my shotgun. He was just a nice kid."

What was it about this kid that made everyone fall in love with him? Surely he had a skeleton in the closet, had made a mistake, pissed someone off. If he hadn't, what was the motive to kill him?

June couldn't go into his room. She stood outside, hand held ready to knock, as if Jimmy was on the other side ready to tell her to quit bothering him. She was alone, her parents asleep downstairs. After saying goodbye to Hank, she had snuck back up the stairs, hoping to go straight back to bed. But she stopped, and stared at the closed door, wondering if the last few days had been imagined. The windows cast bright light into the hallway, the moon dancing across the hall, but June was wrapped in shadows, a cloud enclosing her body into a stuffy cocoon, one that would never let her turn into a butterfly. She would be stuck in this cloudy prison forever, never able to get the thought of her brother's body on the ground out of her mind. It was stamped with authenticity much like the Louisville slugger bat that was propped against his bedroom door.

She lightly pushed open the door, watching as her brother's memories leapt into the light. His sports trophies, his awards from school, his newly bought baseball cards still sitting on his bed. His desk was covered in letters, preparations to go off to the university in the fall. His bed was made, most likely by their mother. He had had the best view in the house three large windows looking out towards downtown. She slowly crossed the threshold hoping to look around last time and then shutting it forever. However, once she entered, she was consumed by him. Everything about this room reminded her of him, the other half of her soul that had been hacked out of her life. She ventured in more and more, until she was climbing onto his bed, curling into a fetal position. She was trying to imagine him sleeping here, sharing a space with him, much like the womb. June pulled her knees up to her chest and sobbed quietly, letting the moonlight wash over her silent misery.

Hank was much too comfortable in the police station. He leaned back in his chair, his dark hair falling into his eyes, acting as if he wasn't being interrogated about the murder of one of his friends.

"Jimmy was the most well-liked kid in our class. He was friends with everybody, guys and gals alike. He might've not been the brightest or the fastest, but man was he a swell guy." Hank hooked his thumbs underneath his suspenders as he talked to Lund. "He was one of my best friends—I just can't believe anyone would have any reason to do this to him." "You done with me, Mister? I gotta get home."

"I'm not here to ask you about Jimmy, son."

Hank looked quizzically at him, his feet plopping down to the ground.

"You were at the hospital the night of Jimmy Schaefer's murder. Trying to comfort his sister, June."

"Sure. Jimmy, June, and I were super close. Once I heard the news, I had to see if she was alright."

Hank had bust through the hospital doors only minutes after Lawrence had carried June inside. He looked around frantically, hair wild as if he had just gotten out of bed, shirt half buttoned. He rushed over to June who was being led away by two nurses. She froze as he approached.

"June! Baby, are you alright?" he asked, reaching out to her, but she shriveled away from his outstretched hand. The nurses tried to lead her away, but Hank grabbed her.

"June!"

At the sound of his voice, her eyes became alert. She jumped at him, clawing at his shirt, his face, beating him with bloodied fists. Her cries echoed through the hospital, heads poking of other rooms to see what the commotion was about.

"June! What's wrong? What happened?" He tried to smooth her hair, but she thrashed against his touch, trying all the more to hurt him. The nurses dragged her off of him, pulling her down the hall. Her voice was strangling itself, her mouth trying to form words while her cries overpowered them. It was a mixture of different pitches and sounds, a garbled unrecognizable mess. Lund watched quietly from his seat, as Hank's face turned from concern, to confusion, to one of grief. He slowly sank down to his knees, covering his face in his hands. A nurse approached him and motioned for him to also go down the hall, to be cleaned up. He pulled himself off the floor slowly and trudged towards a set of double doors.

"How did you know she was there? They only telephoned her parents after she arrived."

Hank thought carefully for a moment. "I saw them heading off in that direction, that night. I shot the bull with Jimmy, winked at June and went on my merry way. I had a date that night ya see."

"So you wouldn't call your relationship with June Schaefer anything but a friendship?"

Hank's eyes darkened for a moment. "I wasn't allowed to be interested in her, no sir. Jimmy made sure of that."

"Did you respect his wishes?" Lund peered at Hank's face. He appeared calm and collected, picking the lint off his shirt as if they were talking about the crop. He pulled out a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it, puffing out a long stream of smoke.

"Course I did. He was my best friend."

Lund slammed June's journal on the table. Hank didn't recognize what it was, or pretended that he didn't. He stared at the boy for a long moment, trying to call his bluff. "You sure that's your final answer? 'Cuz I've got forty-some pages that says otherwise."

"Oh, god. Jimmy." June touched her brother's heaving chest, as he struggled to catch his breath. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get the blood to come off of her hands. She looked up, and realized that she was alone. The others

had run off, and she was abandoned, watching her brother expire in her arms.

"Cowards!" she yelled into the forest, the night creeping in around her. Her heart was tight in her chest, an unfamiliar feeling tugging it in two different directions. She touched her cheeks, not realizing that she was crying. She couldn't catch her breath, a hiccup forming in between her mouth and her lungs, forcing the air out and not letting any to come in. She wasn't sure how long she had sat there, before looking up and seeing the outline. The faint outline of her and Hank's initials.

"You've gotta be kidding me," she said aloud, as she sat back on her heels. She could no longer hear Jimmy's gasping, only see the faint outline of his chest rising and falling. Her heart was slowly being severed from her chest, skipping and beating fast all at the same time, as if her and Jimmy's heart were competing for attention in her chest. Hers was trying to beat for both of them, He was fading fast.

She collapsed on to his body, her dress becoming stained by his former life. She started to sob, regretful about the decisions she had made.

"I take it all back," she whined, sobbing into his shirt. "Come back, Jimmy."

She apologized over and over, the moon rising high in the night sky. Long after his body stopped rising and falling, she stayed, holding onto him. What had she done?

"June!" Someone shook her. "June! What are you doing?"

She looked up to see Hank, standing over her. He looked ghastly in the fog that was seeping from the ground. His face was caught in shadow, a voice from above, a tone that was bringing her back to reality.

"We have to move him," She pushed herself off of the body. She brushed herself off, staggering to her feet.

"What do you mean? What are you still doing here?" Hank questioned, pulling her away from her brother. She stumbled along after him for a moment, before breaking free of his grasp.

Her voice became stronger. "We have to move him."

Lucille Schaefer had stood nervously in the Hotel Roberts lobby. She clutched something beneath her rain jacket, praying silently that she was doing the right thing. June had left the porch earlier that morning to visit the store, leaving her journal behind. The wind was subtle, but strong enough to flip through the pages. She jumped when Lund touched her arm.

"Mrs. Schaefer, what a nice surprise. What can I do for you?" He motioned to the lobby chairs, extremely private for such a public, expansive lobby. He pulled out a chair for her and then took one opposite. He took his notepad out of his jacket, flipping to a new page. "So, what's this all about?"

Lucille suddenly stood, regretting her decision to give this information to a man that she didn't know anything about, one that could possibly take away their daughter too. "I'm not sure my husband—"

"If the police are going to find the person that did this, you'll eventually have to talk to someone. Now you said you had something that might help with my investigation. You wouldn't want to withhold evidence from someone who's only trying to help you right?" He pulled a pencil out from his jacket pocket.

"What was June like when you talked to her?" Lucille sat back down care-

fully, as if any moment she might run back into the rainstorm and to the comfort of her empty home. She folded her hands delicately, hiding the journal from view.

"I'm not quite sure I understand your question."

"How did my daughter act when she told you her brother was dead?" Lucille's eyes were watery, but they still cut into Lund all the same. They reminded him of the look June had given him in the car. Her outside appearance had been almost horrific, hands shaking, a terrified aura about her. But her eyes were clear, her gaze somber and steady.

"I'm not sure, Mrs. Schaefer. Why?"

She grabbed his arm, her painted nails cutting into his wrist, just beneath the cuff.

"Was she sad?" There was a sense of urgency in Lucille's voice. "Or did she seem indifferent?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

Lucille held something out towards him. It was a small journal, twine bound around it. June's name was cut into the top, the letters the same as the ones in the tree where Jimmy was found.

Lund waited until Hank had left, his large work boots clunking all the way out of the double doors, to venture out into the hallway. The blues stood around for a moment longer, shooting the bull with each other, sipping their coffee, putting out cigarettes, watching the ceiling lights flicker before heading back to whatever they were doing.

"Scuse me, but do you mind if I use your phone?" He asked one of the secretaries. She put the phone up on the raised part of the countertop and sauntered down the hall, calling out to one of the men in blue. "Yes operator? Give me the number for the Schaefers."

May 28, 1932

Once again, Jimmy has successfully ruined any chances of me being happy. He never, ever wanted to go to college, much less leave Middletown. He was going to run Granddaddy's store, like every other man in this family has. He was supposed to. But now, he's getting out of here. Of course he is. I didn't even know he had applied to MU, much less got accepted! And he had the nerve to apply for the scholarship, after helping me with my application? That double-crosser. And of course, if one has to pick between the Schaefer twins I'm going to lose. Every. Single. Time. It's not fair. He knew how bad I wanted that scholarship, how many nights I had stayed up working late. Why can't I just be happy for once? Why hasn't anyone ever picked me over him? I wish I could kill him. Things would be so much simpler if he were dead.

June sat quietly in front of Joss, intimidated by him, like most, quietly inspecting him while avoiding his line of questioning. The sun was setting, her parents closing the store. But she had let Lund in, as he approached the porch swing she was reading on. He held out her journal to her, her eyes flicking up to his suspiciously. She refused to take it from him, silently letting him into the Schaefer home, letting him take a look around. Even in Jimmy's room. Then they settled into the parlor, the large bay windows open to let the air circulate through-

out the house.

No matter his approach, she would just shake her head and pick at the bandages around her wrists. From the journal, which was now sitting in front of them, he knew how different June and Jimmy really were, how they had grown apart, how she had secretly started to see Hank to get back at Jimmy for all the times he had taken something from her, a little form of happiness, a ticket that would get her one step closer to getting out of Middletown.

"I want you to tell me what happened that night, June. What you and Hank did to your brother." Lund leaned back into the chaise, watching her eyes burn brighter.

"It wasn't his idea. Leave him out of it."

"Then whose idea was it?" Lund paused, the granite pausing above the paper in his notepad.

"It was a mistake." She crossed her legs at the ankles, her hands still in her life. "It was all just a stupid mistake."

"At this point it doesn't matter what it was, your brother's dead." Lund wiped his forehead, "I need the names, June."

"It's my fault," She whispered, looking out the windows of the parlor, facing out at the evening sun.

"I know you didn't always adore your brother, but I don't believe you're the one that killed him." Lund stared at the girl sitting in front of him. She wasn't as stoic as she had once appeared, shrinking into the chair across from him. Trying to get away from the journal, the evidence of her fury against her twin.

Jimmy could hear June's screams, thrashing his head wildly around to try and knock off the cloth covering his head. The pillowcase would not move and the sun had already sunk beneath the treeline, casting shadows in front of him. Figures moved quickly in and out of his vision, making his eyes swim behind the dark sheet. Suddenly he heard a gun click, loudly next to his ear.

"Leave her alone!" he called out, his voice reverberating in his throat. "What do you want?"

The gun fired in response, making him scream in horror, his body flying to the ground. Two large hands dragged him up, and then let go, another click of the gun making him flinch. His shoulders shook in the heat, a frost moving from the top of his head down to his knees. June was hysterical, shrieking "Let him go! Please! Don't hurt him!" but he could only hear cruel laughter in the silence.

The gun fired three times in quick succession, making contact with the tree beside him. He cowered over, silently crying into the ground. He was roughly pulled up again, the butt of the gun shoved into his back. He cried out in pain, as he was struck again and again.

"Hank! Help! Somebody help!" He got no response, only the cruel laughter of his captors.

"Not so perfect now are ya, Schaefer?" a low growl breathed into his ear.

"What do you want?" Jimmy started to move forward, the gun clicking beside him. "What do you want from me?"

"We just want you to feel small for once in your life. Like you don't exist." Another voice, this one raspy and light, said from behind him.

And then he heard two shots, and an immense heat rippling through his

body. He fell to the ground, blinking rapidly and finding it hard to bleed. It grew silent for a moment, the forest quieted by the echo of Jimmy's struggle to breathe. The pain in his chest grew as something warm climbed from his ribs to his stomach. And then June started screaming, a shriek so loud that all of Middletown must've heard her.

"Oh shit." One of the voices said. "Oh shit!"

There was a rustle of leaves around, someone falling beside him, pulling him up into their lap. There was a pressure on his chest, the pillowcase allowing for an outline of a person trying to stop the warmth from spreading. She was crying, screaming at someone, but Jimmy couldn't understand who. He was sinking into the ground, sinking into the forest floor, the warmth slowly turning to a chill. He gasped for breath,

"Oh god, god what did we do? Jimmy!" June cried.

The pillowcase was pulled off, but he could not find her face. Instead there were two bright lights heading towards him in the darkness, as if they were headlights from a car coming to rescue them.

## Part 2

# Breaking a Home

“I’ve been immersed in it too long.  
My spirit is wobbly and my mind is confused.  
The hurt has become too great.”

-- Ernie Pyle

# Letting Go

Johnna Lorenzano

*(Middletown, Indiana 1942)*

I think everyone has those moments in their life. You know, the ones that really make you think back on everything? Years later, after it all seems so long ago, I can look back and remember so vividly how everything happened. And the funny thing is, while my body seems to be getting worse with age for some reason my memory seems to be getting better. It's almost as if the more time passes, the stronger these memories become. One minute I'm rocking in my big wooden porch swing with my grandchildren on my lap and the next minute I'm running down Madison Street eyes wide open praying to God my parents aren't home. "Slow down, Antonia!" I panted as I watched my beautiful cousin gain a significant distance between us. Her long auburn curls floated in the wind back and forth as she ran. I dropped my book bag in the dirt and stood up straight putting my arms over my head. There was a cramp in my side and I could feel beads of sweat starting to form on my forehead. I spit on the ground as I caught my breath. Antonia looked back and puts her hands on her hips with a matter-of-fact look on her face.

"Maria, you know if you don't hurry up you are going to make us both late, capeesh?" Antonia snapped at me. We left late for school again. This was the second time this week. I knew that if we were late one more time Sister Superior was not going to be happy. I guess we had better get going.

But in all fairness, I thought to myself, it's been pretty hard for me lately. In the last four months all six of my older brothers have left for the war. That's why I've been helping mamma and papa with extra chores around the house. I've also been working more on account of my brothers not being able to. And boy do I hate working. Antonia and I both work at the Ball Glass Factory canning jars at the end of the line. She is so small that even when she stands on her tippy-toes sometimes I still have to help her reach the jars so she doesn't get behind. We often giggle while we work and all of the older women shoot daggers at us with their eyes. But I guess we don't care as long as we're getting paid.

Antonia brings me back to reality. "Well?" She is nearly yelling. "Can we get going *please*?"

I picked my book bag up, brushed off the dirt, and jogged ahead. It may have been early, but there was nowhere else I'd rather have been headed. School had



been my sanctuary ever since my brothers left. When I was at school I didn't have to worry about the war or the laundry or my dad coming home from work drunk. School was the only place I could go and feel like something in my life mattered. That's why St. Mary's was probably my favorite place in the whole entire world. Well, maybe besides the bridge with the railroad tracks at McCulloch Park. That's the place I went to be alone.

As Antonia and I walked to school I looked up at the gray sky and tried to decide what kind of day it would be. I could see dark clouds rolling in and the smell of the rain was so fresh in the air I could nearly taste it on my lips. My stomach told me that it might not be such a good day.

Antonia's older brother Frankie came to pick her up from school today since it was still raining when we were dismissed. Even though I lived just two blocks away from Antonia I decided to walk home. After a nice whipping from Sister Superior this morning for my tardiness, I was not ready to face my parents just yet.

The rain had reduced to just a trickle so I decided to stop by my bridge for some time to think. I came out here a lot to write letters to my brothers. Since neither Mama nor Papa could read or write in English I wrote one letter each night to one my brothers. Tonight I thought I would write to my brother Mikey. As I reached McCulloch Park I looked around and exhaled a sigh of relief. No one was there. The best kinds of days were the ones when I was there alone. I skipped towards the sturdy iron bridge that sat patiently waiting for me. I stretched my right foot out as far as I could and shifted my weight to the first crossbeam. The rain had left puddles of water everywhere and I was careful not to step in one and slip. There was something exciting about the danger that came with walking along those railroad tracks. Sometimes I would take turns walking along each side as if it were a tightrope. Other times I spread my feet across to both sides and shimmied down toward the center of the bridge. No matter how I made my way across, I always looked down and thought that a fall from that height would surely kill me.

I finally made it to my favorite spot on the bridge, right in the center where I could lean my back against one of the pillars and look out at the beautiful landscape. Sometimes, if I sat real still, I swore I could feel the steady vibrations of a train coming full speed ahead. I felt invincible, dangling my legs high above the water. I swung my book bag into my lap and grabbed my composition book and pencil.

Thirty minutes went by as I lost myself in my letter to Mikey. I told him about everything I had been up to since he left. I wrote about being elected as freshman class secretary at school and how I would get to help plan that year's homecoming ball. As I signed my name across the bottom of the page I looked up and noticed it had already gotten darker. Momma and Papa will have expected me home by now. Carefully I tore the paper out of my notebook, folded it up, and tied everything up in my book bag. Just as carefully as I came, I headed back to safety on solid ground.

Or so I thought.

When I got home I had an uneasy feeling. I hoped that Sister Superior had not told my parents I was late again. But when I walked in the door everything seemed fine.

“Fare il bucato, Maria.” Mama demanded as I walked in the door. She was clearly unhappy with how late I was coming home. I threw my book bag on the kitchen table as I stormed back to the bathroom to fill the wash bin. So much for a “nice to see you!” or “how was school?”

I filled the bin with water studying my reflection. I was lost in a daydream about school when suddenly I heard a knock at the door. We moved from Indianapolis over a year ago and as far as I could remember, we never had any company. My stomach did a summersault and I knew immediately that something wasn’t right. I set the laundry down, and leaned around the corner. I was so quiet I could hear my heartbeat through my chest.

Papa answered the door. “Ciao?” It was more of a question than a greeting. I heard a loud crash and Papa yelled angrily. I waited a few more minutes before I felt safe enough to walk in the other room. My knees rattled like broken metal.

As I crossed over the threshold into the living room I saw Mama sitting at the table, broken glass on the floor. She was hysterical. Her black hair strewn about her head and her face was red and streaked with tears. Papa was holding a knife and standing in the doorway, shouting at a man dressed in a Western Union uniform. The man didn’t have to tell my parents he had bad news, it was written on his face.

I rushed to the front door and ducked around my dad.

“Sir! Let me help you!” I yelled as I pushed the man away from Papa.

“Y-you speak English?” He asked trembling with a sigh of relief.

“Yes. What do you need?” I quizzed.

All of a sudden he looked deflated, as if the life had been drained from his body. He stepped outside so we could talk away from the storm raging in my living room.

“What’s your name little lady?” He asked in a soft whisper.

“Maria.”

“Maria, I need you to tell your parents I have some bad news. Do you think you can do that?”

I felt a lump in my throat and suddenly I had the urge to vomit right there on his shiny black boots. I didn’t even look him in the face; I just stared back at my reflection in his shoes. All I could do was nod sheepishly.

“I regret to tell you this, but your older brother Anthony was killed. He was shot in Italy near Mount Consentino. I cannot give you much more information than that. I need you to be brave and tell your parents what happened. Do you understand?” he took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his brow. “I am so sorry.”

Time stood still. I was sad and angry. But most of all, I was scared. How could I tell my parents that their oldest son, my brother, was killed? Not only that, but he was killed just miles away from mama’s home in Italy. I was only fourteen years old. How could I carry that burden?

I’m not sure how long I stood there until the man holding the telegram patted me on the shoulder.

“Here ya go kid. Hang on to this. You can read it to them later if you want to.” The man handed me the telegram, put his hat back on his head, and started down the gravel driveway. Just before he got into his green truck he stopped one last time and muttered an almost inaudible, “I’m so sorry.”

That night I read the telegram aloud to my parents, translating it to Italian

so they could understand. As soon as they realized what had happened to Tony I ran into my room and pushed my dresser up against my door. Papa would need someone to take his anger out on tonight and I did not feel like accommodating. I had had enough beatings for one day.

After Tony was killed papa prohibited me from going to school. He insisted that he had already lost one child and he wasn't about to lose another. I had to stay home and stay safe. Consequently Papa never shut up about the war. He always had a bottle in his hand as he complained about this God forsaken country. And for once in my life I didn't blame him. Us Italians were having a hard enough time making a living in America. After the Great Depression my family moved here to Middletown so Papa could find a factory job. It was like starting over again. I still didn't feel like I belonged. America was angry and dark, decorated in the tears of broken immigrant dreams. Here in Middletown the word "wop" clung to me like a shadow, following me in whispers and sneers everywhere I went. We were hated. Despised. Italian Catholics were deemed traitors to this nation. The fact was that Americans hated my family and everything we stood for. And even so, my brother died defending them.

Six long weeks crawled by. In that time Mama had hardly left her room. When she did she appeared emaciated and pale, like a starving child. While mama wasted away in her depression induced hibernation I spent hours washing and hanging the laundry, cooking dinner, and being on the receiving end of dad's drunken blows. I felt weak physically and mentally. And without the sanctuary of school to help me through, I felt cold and distant from the world. My heart had become so hardened by the trying times that I thought it was a block of ice, likely to shatter any moment. In our tiny little home, I wanted desperately to cling to someone just to feel the warmth of support. But I was alone.

One evening as I was frying bologna for dinner I heard a knock at the door. My heart sank. The fear came rushing back to me and I felt my face get hot with anger. My papa was already drunk and mama was still in her room. I shuffled to the door, peering over my shoulder to make sure no one had heard. "Maria, dear! May we come in?" I was shocked to see Sister Superior and my English teacher Sister Anne standing at the door. Their religious garbs ruffled in the wind.

"Yes please!" I beamed as I made a place for them to sit at the table. "Is everything okay?" A million questions raced through my mind. Until that moment I had forgotten just how much I missed them!

"Well," Said Sister Superior, "That is what we came to find out." I looked over my shoulder to see what Sister Superior was staring at. My father had quietly entered the room and his disapproval suffocated me.

"Maria, I need you to explain to your parents that we are here to encourage you to come back to school. You have already paid your tuition for the year. We have teachers willing to work after school to catch you up on all the studies you have missed." The whole time Sister Superior spoke my father paced the room, arms folded across his chest. As she sat there waiting she swung a rosary back and forth in her hands. I wasn't sure if she was nervous or if she was praying for my father to cooperate. I knew the inevitable answer papa would give her. It was a battle I had already lost. But to prove my desire to return back to school, I turned to papa and explained what Sister Superior had said.

“NO! SHE STAY!” Papa interjected before I could finish. His English was broken and saliva spewed from his mouth as he slammed the kitchen table and repeated his mantra over and over.

“Mr. Sergi, we will be forced to report you to the authorities.” Sister Anne interjected. She spoke with a fire in voice as if she had a desperate need for him to understand the severity of his disobedience to their request.

I could tell they weren’t going to give up. Pride swelled within me. After hours of translation, several Hail Marys, and a few hundred Italian swear words an agreement had been made. I was to return to school the following Monday. The only stipulation was that I give up my plaid St. Mary’s jumper for black mourning clothes. It’s customary for Italians to demonstrate their mourning by wearing black. That was a deal I could live with.

Though I still missed my brothers, I was happy to be back at school. Things had settled down for a couple weeks. However, I should have known it was simply the calm before the storm

As I headed off to lunch with my classmates one Friday afternoon Sister Superior stopped me in the hallway.

“Maria, I have a very important message for you. Will you step into my office?” She said. Her eyes were glassy and her lip quivered. I didn’t answer, but followed her into the small cramped room.

“You know your neighbor Henrietta? The one who lives across the street? She called and she wants you to come straight to her house right now. There was another telegram for your family. Henrietta intercepted it before your parents could. Father John is at her house and they are going to tell you what you need to do. I want you to hurry home before your parents see you and you must talk to no one on your way.” Sister Superior gave me a hug, but I did not feel its warmth. I felt hollow and weak, ready to collapse under the pressure. I ran home faster than ever. Colors blurred into one as I headed down Madison Street, my eyes fixed on Henrietta’s house.

That night the lies spilled out of my mouth like vomit. Uncontrollable and unwanted. I knew Father John and Henrietta were right. They were older and wiser. But in the end, they were really just afraid. And so was I. I knew that if I told the truth about what happened to Rocco there was a chance my fate would be just as bad. While I didn’t think it was possible, Papa’s drinking seemed to be getting worse. I *had* to lie. I had to lie to protect myself and to protect my parents. How could I let them lose another son?

That night I told Mama and Papa Rocco had been injured. I told them he took a bullet in the leg. It was a minor injury, I lied. But that was not the truth. Alone in my room I turned the telegram over in my hands trying to make sense of the words on the paper.

REPORT JUST RECEIVED THROUGH THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS STATES THAT YOUR SON ROCCO J SERGI IS A PRISONER OF WAR OF THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT LETTER OF INFORMATION FOLLOWS FROM PROVOST MARSHAL GENERAL

I memorized the faded words and yet I did not know what they said. Rocco was captured somewhere overseas and I let my poor parents believe that he was simply injured. The reality of what had happened stung me like a knife in my back. I feared for my brother and prayed to the Lord every night that he was

okay.

Selfishly I also feared for myself. This telegram was proof of my lie. It was evidence that I had betrayed my parents. If they ever discovered what I had done they would never forgive me. Family was all we had here in America and I had turned my back on them. I wanted to bury the telegram so deep that it suffocated under the earth and no longer existed. I wanted to wake up and realize this was a dream. But I knew it wasn't.

I needed that telegram. I needed to read and reread it. I needed to feel the pages between my fingers and know that Rocco had a chance. One thing was for sure, I couldn't leave it behind for fear that my parents would somehow read it and understand the truth.

The guilt was agonizing. For months I carried the weight of the telegram with me everywhere I went. As I slept I tucked the telegram under my pillow. Throughout the night I could hear it whisper to me of the lies and the shame I had caused my parents. On my way to school I could feel it burn a hole in my book bag and sting my skin as a reminder of the pain Rocco was surely enduring. It begged me relentlessly to unveil the truth. It ate away at my conscious, preventing me from forgetting about the war, even just for a moment. I couldn't carry its burden any longer. I needed to let go.

As it always does, the school year drew to an end. I was nervous for the summer ahead. Although Sister Superior promised to come by and check on me, I knew it wouldn't be the same.

On the last day of school the sunshine beamed from above and drenched the earth in a blanket of warmth that felt a lot like hope. I looked up at the sky and knew that it was the day to start over.

After I said so long to all my classmates as we parted ways for the summer I made up my mind to stop by my favorite spot on the way home. I skipped to McColloch Park where I tossed my book bag in the dirt and climbed atop my favorite bridge. Carefully I stretched out my right foot and leapt to the first cross-beam. For the first time, I faced the bridge without fear. I was invincible.

When I finally made it to the center of the bridge, I looked out at the beautiful world around me. Even in the darkest of days I knew that God was watching over me. Finally, I knew that I did not need to carry the pain or guilt of the war with me any more. I reached into my pocket and unfolded the tattered brown piece of paper that had caused me so much suffering. The war overseas may not have been over, but the war within me needed to end. I said a prayer for Rocco, and I let go.

The telegram drifted downward until it landed softly on the water. I watched for a moment as it floated downstream. I felt lighter. I felt free.

# The Sailor

Allison Springman

*(Summer – 1942)*

“Dang nabbit Ruth, open the door!”

I can’t believe that this is really how I’m going to be spending my summer vacation. I’m nineteen years old and just finished my first year at Middletown University, I should be at Tuhey Pool catching up with my friends from high school, not sitting at home trying to get my 11 year old sister to unlock her bedroom door.

“Please Ruth, come out here and talk to me for a minute.”

“I don’t want to talk to you Ellie! Go away!” Ruth shouted through the door.

Of course she doesn’t want to talk to me, she never wants to talk to me. Fine, she can stay in there if that’s how she wants to act, she’ll get hungry eventually. I walked back into the kitchen and started cleaning up the mess that was supposed to be Ruth’s lunch. When Ruth had come to get the sandwich I made for her she blew a fuse, throwing the sandwich to the floor and ranting about the crust not being cut off. Since when did she care about the crust not being cut off? It certainly isn’t something to throw a tantrum about. But that’s the “new” Ruth as I have started to think of her. She never used to act like this, not until last winter.

After I finished cleaning up the kitchen, I went out into the backyard and started pulling the laundry off the clothesline. As I unclipped one of the towels, folding it and placing it into the basket by my feet, my mind kept running through Ruth’s outburst and how it could have easily been avoided if mom had simply told me about Ruth’s newfound hatred of bread crusts. Or maybe she didn’t even know, it’s not like she is ever home to make Ruth’s lunch anymore.

Three months ago mom decided she needed to “join the war effort” and got a job at the local factory. She left early in the morning and didn’t come home until dinnertime, sometimes later, which left me to look after Ruth and take care of the housework that mom used to do. I still can’t understand why she decided she needed to go to work, we don’t need the money and she used to love being a stay at home mother. But that was before war, before the attack on Pearl Harbor that changed everything. The war changed mom, it changed Ruth, and it even changed me.

Folding the last of the laundry, I picked up the basket and carried it all back into the house. Ruth was in the kitchen, digging through the refrigerator.

"I knew you would come searching for food eventually," I said in a teasing voice, hoping to lighten the mood a little bit and avoid another outburst.

"Yep, I'm making my own sandwich this time," Ruth said. Although she seemed to have calmed down, there was still some bitterness in her voice so I chose to ignore the not so subtle jab and continued on through the house to put the clean towels in the linen closet.

### **Later that night...**

Ruth and I were in the living room, listening to the radio, when Mom got home from the factory. By the time Ruth had finished her lunch, her anger had dissipated completely and she was back to the fun little sister that I loved. We were listening to our favorite comedy (It was the only time we ever listened to the radio anymore. Neither of us can stand hearing all of the war updates that flood all of the other stations nonstop) when we heard the front door open and mom walked into the living room.

"Hi girls! Did you have a nice day?" Something was wrong. Mom was smiling and sounded cheerful enough, but it was obvious she was forcing it. She always tried to hide how tired she was after a long day at the factory, but this was different. She was nervous about something and I immediately felt edgy. It wasn't until she took another step into the room that I noticed she wasn't alone. Behind her, standing just inside the front door, was young man holding a duffle bag.

"Girls, I want you to meet Leo Walker. Leo, these are my daughters Ellie and Ruth."

"It's nice to meet you both. Helen has told me a lot about you. I appreciate you letting me stay here, I just moved to town and don't know many people yet."

Wait what? I stared at Leo for a minute, trying to wrap my head around everything he just said. First of all, did he just call my mom Helen? Who does he think he is? I think Mrs. Maxfield would be a little more appropriate considering he can't be much older than me. And second, what did he mean 'I appreciate you letting me stay here'? He must be off his rocker.

Many people are still recovering from the Depression and the start of the war, so a lot of people from the south have been moving north looking for work. With so many men leaving for war, there are definitely more jobs available for them, however that doesn't mean the town is big enough. Currently all housing developments have been put on hold. With everything being focused on the war effort, there aren't any resources available for building new houses, leaving the new arrivals no place to go. I have heard that a lot of people in town have been renting out rooms to the newcomers, giving them a place to stay until they can find one of their own, but I never would have thought Mom would do it. I mean it seems crazy to allow some random person you don't know to stay in your home. There has to be some kind of explanation.

"Excuse me, did you say stay here?" I asked.

"Ruth," mom said quickly, "Could you show Leo where the guest room is please?"

"Sure thing! Follow me Leo, it's this way!" Ruth said excitedly as she practically skipped down the hallway, her light brown curls bouncing off her shoulders. Of course Ruth would be over the moon about this. One thing that hasn't

changed about Ruth is her excitement at meeting new people. That's all she sees when she looks at Leo, a potential new friend. I'm not so optimistic.

After Leo has disappeared down the hall I follow mom into the kitchen. "You aren't really letting him live here right? This is just for one night until he finds someplace else?"

"No Ellie, Leo will be staying with us for awhile. I have offered to let him rent the guest room for as long as he wants it."

"Mom..."

"Ellie please, ease off a bit. He came into the factory today looking for a job and I overheard him asking about possible places for rent."

"So you just offered up our guest room? That's nuts!"

"I don't think there is anything to worry about. I talked to him on my lunch break and he is a very nice boy. He wasn't able to get a job at the factory due to an injury, but he was still planning on staying in town."

"How can you be so sure that he isn't some swigger who'll go off on a bender every night? You just met him today?" There was something she wasn't telling me. Mom was never good at keeping secrets, but she was trying really hard to now.

"I just know. Give him a chance Ellie and in time you will know too." Mom kissed my cheek and left me alone in the kitchen. I heard her telling Ruth that it was time for her to go to bed and knew the inevitable pouting was about to start. Still standing in the kitchen, I kept trying to figure out what Mom meant when she said she 'just knows'. How can you possibly know something like that? I turned around, planning on going to my room, and found I wasn't alone. Leo was standing in the doorway. Goodness he was quiet; I hadn't even heard him walk up.

"How long were you standing there?" I asked, wondering if he had just been standing there watching me.

"I just came in," he responded. "I was about to say hello, but you turned around before I got a chance."

"Okay. Well goodnight," I said, getting ready to duck around him and rush to my bedroom. Mom might be comfortable with him, but I wasn't.

"You don't like me much do you?" he said before I could make my get away.

"Why would you think that?"

"It's written all over your mug," he said with a chuckle. "You aren't exactly good at hiding your feelings."

Well that was true enough. I have heard my whole life that I am an open book when it comes to what I'm feeling. Subtlety isn't exactly a strong suit of mine. Well since the cat was out of the bag anyway I might as well be honest. "I don't know you and I don't feel comfortable with you living in my house. How do I know you aren't some creep that is going to rob us blind in the middle of the night or something?"

He looked slightly amused at my bluntness. "Don't worry, I would never take advantage of the kindness your mother showed me today. I am thankful to have a roof over my head tonight and would never repay that by stealing." Well if he was a liar he was a darn good one because he actually seemed very sincere when he said that. "Would it make you feel better," he continued, "if I let you ask me some questions so you could know more about me?"



I hesitated for a second because, although I would feel better knowing at least something about the person sleeping in our guest room, how could I be sure anything he told me was true? Sighing, I decided it really didn't matter, since he would be staying anyway, so why not see what I can find out. "I guess it couldn't hurt."

"No it can't," he said. "I'm dog tired after all the traveling, so how about tomorrow you take me on a tour of this town and I'll let you put me through the wringer?"

"Sounds swell," I said with a fake smile that I hoped didn't look as cheesy as it felt. Ruth has a play date with the neighbor girl anyway so I'll be ready to go by 10."

"It's a date. 'Night Doll." I watched as he turned and disappeared into the guest room, waiting until the door was fully closed before I followed suit and went to my own room.

### **The next morning...**

Leo and I had been walking for about ten minutes in silence, neither of us apparently wanting to jump the gun and start talking first. We were passing the Sergi's house when I couldn't take the quiet anymore. "So, is Leo Walker your real name?"

Leo laughed and nodded his head. "Yes it is. Is Ellie your real name?" When he caught my stare he just chuckled again and said, "What, did you think I wasn't going to ask you questions too? Seems only fair to me."

"A wise guy huh? Okay, I'll play your game. No, Ellie is not my real name. It's Eleanor. But don't even think about calling me that unless you want me to snap a cap." Nobody called me Eleanor except mother when she was really angry with me. We continued to walk a little longer in mutual quiet as I thought over what to ask him next. We had already passed Brookley Funeral Home and were almost to the park when I finally decided to stick to the basics...for now. I'll get to the harder questions later. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two," he replied, "My birthday's in the fall."

"I turn twenty in August." I respond right away, figuring I might as well save him the trouble of asking. We had just come up to West Bridge and I stopped. I could hear the train whistling in the distance and I loved to watch as it sped across the bridge. "Where are you from?"

"Born and raised in Tennessee, about an hour outside of Nashville. I couldn't wait to get out of there though and left as soon as I turned eighteen. Have you lived in Middletown your whole life?"

"Yeppers, I can't imagine living anywhere else." I could feel myself relaxing a bit. He only answered a couple questions but there was something about him that made me feel at ease. I'm sure the fact that he was sort of a dreamboat helped too. "What were you doing before you decided to move here?" I could tell that question made him uncomfortable when the grin he seemed to always have slipped a bit and he hesitated a moment before answering.

"I was in the Navy."

I felt my stomach drop. The Navy? What are the odds that of all the people my mom could have met and invited into our home, she picked a sailor? Maybe that's why she looked so nervous, she was afraid of how I would react.

Swallowing the sudden lump in my throat, I looked back at the bridge just as the train started to make it's way across and decided to keep going. "Why aren't you there now? Shouldn't you be on a ship or something? We are at war you know?" That came out harsher than I meant it to, but I was too preoccupied to really care. If I thought my head was spinning before, it was nothing compared to how I felt now.

"I was injured and given a honorable discharge."

That must be the injury mom was talking about. It must have been pretty bad if it caused the Navy to discharge him. "Where were you hurt?"

"Head injury. The doctor said there's permanent damage to my equilibrium. Aside from occasional dizziness and lack of balance it doesn't affect my day-to-day life, but you can't have an unbalanced sailor walking around the deck of a ship."

That's true; nobody wants to worry about a dizzy sailor falling overboard when they're in the middle of a war. I wanted to ask what could have caused such an injury, obviously it had to have been something pretty big, but I was afraid I already knew the answer. "When...when did this happen?"

He didn't answer for a minute, and I almost thought he wasn't going to. He took a deep breath and said, "Seven months ago. I was in Hawaii when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor." It felt like all of the air had been sucked out of my lungs. I could tell by the way he was looking at me that there was more, so I held my breath and waited for him to continue. "I was standing on the deck of the Arizona with my captain when we saw the first planes fly overhead."

Now I really couldn't breathe. He was on the Arizona, standing next to the ship's captain, probably the last person to speak to him. This can't be real.

"Ellie." I was pulled from my thoughts at the sound of him saying my name. I looked at him and I could see it in his eyes. It wasn't an accident that he showed up in Middletown, at the factory my mother was working at. He came here to find us, the family of Captain Richard Maxfield. "He was my dad," I whispered.

"I know."

# Going Knight

Col-in Noll

*(1940-1945, Unspecified Present)*

Middletown, my hometown, is a place where the winds of change blow quietly, but at a constant flow. It's the center of the Midwest, and at the edge of my mind. It sure isn't the centerpiece to my life. No... that would be my wife. Middletown is the metal that holds it all together. It's not what it once was that's for sure, but all things change in time. Things come and go like the wind, rarely staying in one spot forever. Some things take forever to come to you, and others take forever to leave. Your friends can come into your life in a bright flash and leave within an instant, leaving you wondering what went wrong. My life, though, is all of these things. I've been alive long enough, heck, I am almost ninety, and it's time I tell my story. I'll save you from the ones my wife tells you all of the time, bless her heart. No, this time I'll tell you about what she can't talk about much. I'll tell you about when those winds of change blew me around and whipped me up. I'll tell you about my old friend, and how much leaving Middletown really got me going.

Hell and boot camp and synonyms, as I found out. I had always heard stories, but living through the experience was something else. You're eternally exhausted since you're woken up whenever the drill instructors want you to be awake. Often times, the incessant screaming was the only thing keeping you alert—something the instructors knew and used to their advantage. On top of the erratic schedules and little sleep received from them, we “boots,” the colloquial term for recruit, were made to do everything at maximum pace. Running, marching, cleaning, eating, hydrating; these were all things we future Marines did at maximum pace.

GySgt. Moore was the worst and the best of them all. Night and day, I knew he was always watching for any mistakes from me. That's what I got for making him mad the first day, though. He was a relic from the Great War, and whatever kind of shell shock he took back with him was hand-delivered right to me.

When I first met GySgt. Moore, the other boots and I were lined up for our initial orientation. Moore yelled, “Alright boys, I'm going to let you in on a little secret. There's not a single fucking thing I love more than seeing a bunch of spoiled boys run home to mama. I *will* try my hardest to shape you up into

something useful, but I make no guarantees. I have no room in my Marine Corps for faint men.”

I wasn’t paying attention to the gunnery sergeant and instead let my eyes wander over to a couple of black folks walking around behind Moore. At the time, I had just left Middletown and was still in my Uncle’s mindset. I made the mistake of letting my mouth open, “Sir, why’s there a bunch of niggers walking over there? Thought there’s only supposed to be white folks here?”

Moore’s face immediately turned bright red as he stormed over to me. Looking me straight in the eye, he screamed, “You think there’s a problem here boot? You think I don’t fucking know this place like the damn back of my hand? I picked these men out of the bunch because they are good Marines. Cooks, but Marines at the bottom line. So tell me, princess, you think you want to question me anymore? Huh?”

I bit my tongue, not knowing what to do. I had never been yelled at for such a thing before in my life since such a thing to say was always encouraged at home. That was my second mistake, though.

“Answer me!” Moore’s face was bright red. He was using me as an example to scare the other boots right off the bat, but I was too taken aback.

I managed to scoff out a “No Sir!”

Moore wasn’t amused. After more berating, he ultimately decided to teach me a lesson by making me work with the two black men in the kitchen. At the time, I thought I had landed into the worst position ever. In reality, I had done just that, but there was the benefit of being able to meet Micah.

Micah was one of the black men I questioned GySgt. Moore about. He was a cook for our mess hall despite being a Marine as well, but he took his job seriously. He made that very clear the first time we met in the kitchens.

“So you’re the boot that done made fun of us? Figures as much, you got that look on your face. Well, either way, you’re taking orders from me now here in the kitchen, and if you wanna get through being a boot, you’re going to have to be a little more respectful.” Micah waited for a moment for my response.

I choked out, “Yes sir.” I bit my tongue, knowing full well I had to work my way back up in standing with everyone there.

“So then, Knight, does your white ass know how to cook?”

“No, sir.”

“Huh. Well I don’t have the time to teach you, so get over there to the sinks and start cleaning the dishes.” He turned around before saying, “And Knight... just remember I don’t got anything against you. Moore’s a hard-ass but I’m just here to serve my country.” Micah turned to finish a soup he was working on.

I begrudgingly went over to the sink and started washing the dishes, another activity I had never done before. Growing up, my uncle always had someone prepare our meals for us, and he never made me do chores since he thought I had enough trouble with my parents gone. I never learned how to do anything domestic until later.

I continued to wash the dishes for hours, and it seemed to be an impossible task to finish. Everything was so messy, and my hands couldn’t get ahold of how to maneuver certain dishes the right way. Thankfully, it was almost time for me to leave. I knew that I had PT waiting for me after working for Micah, but I’d rather do something I was good at—like running; however, when I turned around, I lost

all sense of that.

As I moved to dry my hands and head to PT, I came face-to-face with the most beautiful woman. She was dressed in some kind of womanly version of the traditional Marine uniform, and boy did it make her look stunning. Her hair was short, but firm and wavy. Her eyes glistened green captivated me for the moment.

She spoke, "Are you Steven Knight? I'm Second Lieutenant Irving, and I'm here to remind you that your shift here is over." She paused for a moment before realizing I was lost in her gaze. "Mister Knight, I'd like to remind you that...."

Micah came over to interrupt the conversation. "Damn! I've never seen a boy so star-struck!"

"When you're a woman, you see this kind of thing all of the time, Micah." Lieutenant Irving rolled her eyes. "I need to get going now regardless. If Mister Knight wants to continue standing there like a buffoon, he may."

"Don't be so hard on him, Donnie. He's got Moore's eye on him, even if it was for being a nigger hater."

I came out of my trance and said, "Hey, sorry!" I was less sorry at the time for being racist, and instead was trying to appear sympathetic to appeal to Donnie.

Donnie continued to walk away. "Then he deserves to get his ass chewed if he's going to be one." Micah snickered at the comment and returned to his soup as I hurried along to get to PT.

The trend continued for a while. I learned that Micah and Donnie were friends from back home, somehow. At the time, the thought of a white woman and a black man growing up as friends together seemed impossible. Both of their fathers worked together in archaeology, so they traveled together for digs and would bring their families along if the sites were safe enough. It was common for me to overhear their conversations while I was washing dishes, and near the end of boot camp, I even started to chime in. In fact, my time at camp was made easier because of them. I got to know most of the other men with whom I bunked with, but Micah and Donnie convinced Moore that I had made amends with Micah, and that targeting me every day was overdoing it.

After the long weeks of training to be a Marine and washing dishes for Micah, I finally graduated. The ceremonies were over before I knew it, and I was immediately sent off to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. Donnie was kind enough to write a sendoff letter to me, something my fiancé, Polly, failed to do. Micah was nowhere to be seen on my last day at camp, but I would understand why later.

The subtle hum of the ship always lulled me to sleep. I was on my way to the deep Pacific, and it was surprisingly surreal. I had always imagined I would be worried or shaken up when it came time for me to go to war, but it seemed to just be a normal day for me. I was one of the last Marines on the USS Severn, as such, I was given one of the last empty rooms to sleep in. I continued to drift off into my first night on the ship until I heard someone come in. I knew it would be my bunkmate, but I laughed when I saw that it was Micah.

"Well I'll be damned! If it isn't the White Knight!" Micah began to call me White Knight just before my graduation, and the name stuck.

“Good Lord, save me.” I whispered under my breath. I still had my deep-seated dislike of black people at the time. Living with my former-KKK uncle and his friend took a toll on me during my youth.

“Don’t be such an ass, Knight. At least you don’t have to learn any new names today!” Micah like to joke around with me at that point, knowing full well I was obligated to respect him since he was also a Marine. He shoved his meager belongings into the tight spaces provided in our cabin, and I simply ignored him and passed out.

The next few weeks were oddly similar to boot camp. I would be assigned to help keep the ship tidy, and Micah was a cook, meaning our paths crossed often. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen keeping up with Micah’s messes, and we would chat regularly. It was more worrisome to me at the time that my only real acquaintance was a black man, than that I was heading off into the largest ocean in the world in order to fight the Japanese. Our conversations usually ended up on the same topic, though.

“So, Micah, what else can you tell me about Donnie?”

“Knight, I’ve already told you most of the important stories. The rest are too boring.”

“I know you’re a stickler for only telling interesting stories, Micah, but I want to hear all of it.”

“You sure are eager to learn more about Donnie for someone who’s engaged.”

“Oh come on, Micah! There’s no harm in being curious.”

“Tell that to the cat. Besides, I’m not sure she’d appreciate having someone like you know everything about her, given your...past.”

“Hey, now! I’m not that bad! If I was, I would have asked for a room change by now.”

“I see your point, but you still got that look in your eye when you look at me.”

“I guess I see your point too. So, then, what was growing up for you like?”

Micah shifted his glance at me. “You really want to hear my stories?”

“Sure, why not? I might as well.”

“Well, as I’ve already told you, I’m the oldest of three, and my dad was an archaeologist. You already know about all the times my family and Donnie’s family got together to go on digs with our fathers, but there are other stories. I grew up in a world where white men didn’t hate black men, but that came down when my papa was killed.”

“Wait, you never said your dad died!”

“Well I’m saying it now. He was at a conference down in south Georgia when he just off and disappeared. We didn’t hear back from him or anyone for weeks until the police found him hanging from a tree with the word ‘nigger’ cut into his chest.”

“I’m...sorry.” I remembered back to when my Uncle Charles and his friend, Ronald would talk about “dealing with niggers,” and it made my heart sink.

“So after that, Donnie’s family helped to take care of us.”

“That’s noble of them. I never really understood that that kind of thing could happen.”

Micah simply shrugged his shoulders and went back to cooking. It took him

a long while after that to want to talk with me, but he eventually came around. It wasn't long, though, until we were getting off the ship and in the thick of it all. Micah and I always seemed to be stationed at the same spot, and he slowly grew on me. He was the first black man I saw as relatable, and it was a strange feeling. I chalk it up now to the reconditioning from the Marines, but at the time, I had no idea what came over me.

Time passed and we kept with each other. He remained a cook since black men weren't stationed for combat for the most part. I was sent on a number of dangerous combat situations, but one in particular changed the course of our relationship. Tinian was a tiny place in the Mariana Islands that was apparently key to our success in the war. Micah was given the new role of supply chaining our resources to the ground forces on the island during the invasion, something he had grown accustomed to over the years in the war. I was one of those ground troops, and among the first landing parties to go in.

During the first few days of the invasion, we staged a successful feint tactic to divert the Japanese away from our actual landing location. With heavy bombardment, we pushed them back and secured a large portion of the island. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of July, though, things took a dire turn. The disastrous weather pinned down our supply lines for the most part, and it damaged our pontoon causeways. That wasn't the worst part, though.

I was guarding the rear supply lines that day, and it was miserable. I was soaked from head to toe, and everything stank like mud. While ending a routine checkup, I ran into Micah and we both seemed to have time on your hands, so we decided to strike up a conversation.

"Doing any better than me? It's getting pretty bad out here. Who knew weather could get this bad out in paradise?"

"Believe me, Knight. If there's a worse day God has planned for me, I'd like to know how he got so damned creative."

"You and me both, Micah. I heard everything over near the ships is top-sy-turvy."

"That aint the half of it. It would be easier to drive a bus over a mountain with no roads than to try and get anything across that pontoon bridge. Shit's gone wild."

"Well damn this weather!" The storm began to pick up again and toss everything around me through the air. Mud was already caked on pretty much everything I carried, so I ended up ignoring the fact that more mud was being flung onto me.

"Might as well hunker down while we can. This isn't looking like it's going to pass anytime soon!"

Micah motioned over to an area nearby. There was thick foliage there and it seemed to be a good spot to get as much of a relief as one could find outside. We both moved over to the spot and took our break there. It wasn't much, but the wind wasn't so bad and the water ran away from our location rather than pooling up beneath our feet.

"So, Knight. How're things going with your girl, Polly?"

"Think the opposite of the weather!" I had to shout to get anything out over the pouring rain.

"Peachy, huh?"

“More like dead silent! Haven’t heard anything from her for over three months!”

“Damn! You send her something?”

“I replied to the last letter, but other than that, no!”

Micah got quiet all of a sudden. I thought it was because he wanted to respect my privacy on the matter of my relationship with my fiancé, but that wasn’t the case. He jumped up as quickly as he could and went over me.

“Knight!” That was all I heard before I turned around to see Micah run through by a katana.

“Shit!” I pulled out my pistol and fired at the Japanese soldier, and my aim was dead on his head. I got him, but not before he also got me right on my side. It hurt like nothing I’ve ever experienced before, but the pain was immediately dulled by my endorphin rush. The Japanese soldier sputtered some words I couldn’t understand, and he and Micah both collapsed to the muddy earth.

“Micah! Shit! Shit! Shit!” I grabbed him and hauled my ass over to the tents. Micah’s blood seeped onto my skin and clothing, staining them with the draining life of my friend. “Hey! Heyyyyy! This guy needs help!” a few fellow Marines rushed over to help carry Micah to our makeshift combat “hospital.” By the time we put him onto a cot, though, his eyes were still and he wasn’t breathing. I had lost too much blood of my own from the bullet wound, and I collapsed to the ground. The last thing I remember from Tinian was grabbing my friend’s arm before losing consciousness.

It had been years since I had seen snow. Between steaming swamps and the endless Pacific, I thought I would never stop feeling the presence of heat; however, that was until I came back to Middletown from war and froze my ass off. I guess there really is no rest for the wicked.

“Steve, my boy!” A voice as thick as molasses came from the doorway of my hospital room. It was Charles, my uncle, and he was accompanied by Ronald. Ronald was Polly’s father, and Charles’s lifelong friend.

“Good morning, Sirs.” I replied with the tone of voice taught to me all of my life—the stern, dry reply given to elders and higher-ups to show your respect. It was just how things worked then. I gave them a smile as I shifted upwards on my bed. The bullet wound on my side still ached, but I knew it was a small-fry compared to what happened to Micah. It had been months since then, but it still made me appreciate how minor my scars were compared to death.

Charles and Ronald both overlooked any concern they may have had and went for the traditional rough handshakes which only heightened my pain. They didn’t seem to notice. After both fulfilled their required obligation, both took a load off of their feet and sat in the basic chairs provided by the hospital. Charles fit snugly despite his rounded stomach, and he tried his hardest to conceal his distaste for the low-quality furniture. Ronald was less forgiving, and called out, “Nurse! Nurse!” A man dressed in the standard nurse’s uniform came around the corner. Ronald spent a moment looking flabbergasted by the fact that the nurse was a man, then promptly remembered the purpose for his interruption. “I’d like a larger chair, son. This one is a little small for a man of my size.” The poor nurse only nodded his head and rushed to find Ronald a chair. “At least he doesn’t dally



with words.” Ronald was a man who prided himself on his intimidating presence. While the years and food hadn’t been kind to his physique, he was still a man that all either revered or feared. Ronald was a former leader in the Klan, and despite his position technically having been dissolved, Ronald wasn’t about to give up everything he’s spent his life building.

“So, what are you to doing visiting poor ol’ me?” I shifted my speech to match the home-grown kid I was before joining the Marine Corps. It struck me a little though, as I didn’t recognize the tone of voice as anything by the *old me*. I had grown up a lot since boot camp, and in many senses, I had grown away as well.

Uncle Charles responded, “Well, Steve, Why do you think we’re visiting? We’ve been keepin’ an eye on you with all of them letters you’s been sendin’ to poor Polly. Girl’s been worried sick and it’s making us start to as well. Since we heard the government let ya off the hook fer your battle wound, we figured we’d outta come swing by.”

I questioned, “Then where’s Polly if she’s so worried about me?” I ignored his other comment since Polly sent about three letters the whole time I was gone, but I didn’t want to bring that up.

“That there is a damn good question, isn’t it Steve.” Charles turned his plump head to Ronald, who was just receiving his new, larger chair.

After the nurse walked back out of the room, Ronald cleared his throat and stated, “Now son, don’t take this the wrong way, but she’s staying home for now since she doesn’t want to see you all banged up. With her being a woman, I told her she shouldn’t risk seeing anything too bad if you’d had been too banged up. On top of that, I’m fairly certain you two wouldn’t have been able to hold to common decency if you two saw each other too soon. We wouldn’t want any trouble with you two on your first week back now would we?” Ronald winked and wheezed a chuckle out as he pulled out a smoke and lit it up. He puffed a hit from the cig and continued, “I know you, son. You’re a good kid and I like you, but Polly is my daughter and she’s going to do things the proper way. I don’t care that you’re her fiancé. You two ain’t going to get into bed with each other until y’all’s married.”

In my mind, I scoffed at such an absurd idea. “Believe me, Sir, even if I wanted to get into bed with Polly right now, I don’t think it would work out being banged up the way I am.” I came off as condescending to Polly saying that I had no immediate intentions to bed her, but while I would have regretted even the slightest chance of that happening before joining the Marines, I didn’t really care then. In all honesty, Ronald wasn’t much to be afraid of compared to GySgt. Moore or a random Jap.

Ronald gave me a stern look before saying, “Either way, y’all better not do anything regrettable.”

Charles had also lit up a smoke in the middle of the conversation. He took a big gulp of smoke before saying, “You’s so worried ‘bout that girl, Ronald. It would almost be adorable if not so damn funny.” Charles was the only one who could joke around with Ronald without stirring ire from him. Even though Charles technically insulted Ronald, Ronald burst out with a mixture of laughing and wheezing. Charles followed in suit as he patted his buddy on the back. “I get’cha every time with my jokes Ron. Too bad y’all sound like a broke radio

with that wheez'n."

"Hush, you bastard. I'm just not as young as I once was. Besides, how can I play a swan song if my voice's broke?" Ronald and Charles burst out laughing once more, completely ignoring me. I remained stoic the whole time, a modification of my personality from the Marines. After being told to do 500 push-ups over a week for laughing while at camp, I learned quickly to turn laughing from instinct into calculated action. At the time, though, laughing would have only agitated my side, so I kept quiet.

"Cat got your laughin' box, boy?" Charles laughed out.

"No Sir. Just the bullet." I gave a little smile before falling back onto the bed dramatically, putting my hand over my head with great, overly-done theatrics. Charles and Ronald laughed and took it as a good sign.

"Well, my boy, it's good to see you're back to your old self. I'm proud you're fighting for our great nation, but I wouldn't want you to lose who you are to war!" Ronald said robustly as he got up from his chair. "I do believe we'd best leave you be to tend to your wounds though, and I'm quite a busy man regardless. Let's shove off Charles."

"Alright Ron, we'll leave the boy be. Jus' get well Steve."

Ronald and Charles left swiftly, trailing a line of smoke behind them. Relieved, I sat back, closed my eyes, and wondered what Donnie and Micah were up to wherever they were.

"Steve...Steve?" Polly waved her hand before my face. My fiancée and the waitress to the side of her were looking at me in anticipation.

"Sorry! I'll have *The Classic*." Polly and I were at my favorite diner, Troy's, having lunch when it came in that the war was officially over. September 2, 1945 seemed both a day and an eternity since its start, but once I heard the great news, I was stunned. "Sorry... just thinking about what this means."

Polly, after sipping on her drink said, "Means we kicked some damn Japs' and Nazis to their rightful place."

*We*. Chills rolled up my spine. How dare she say *we* when she sat comfortably at home while others fought. Hell, she couldn't even use being a woman as an excuse. Donnie knew the right course of action in that regard, and I admired her for her courage. I drank down my discontent with a couple chugs of water. Instead of berating Polly, I tried to change the subject. "So what's your father doing these days now that he doesn't have any *organizational* stuff to attend?"

"Well heck if I know Steve, father doesn't think it right to have women in the affairs of the Klan." She spoke so loud, fearless in her affiliation. I chuckled at thinking how I used to be that way too before boot camp. I knew what Moore or Micah would do in this situation, but I knew it wouldn't be appropriate then.

"Why do you ask, Steve?" Her face was cold and blank, atypical to what you'd think most fiancées would be like.

"He must be doing something with his time other than joke around with my uncle and scare half of the neighborhood with his looks." I took another sip of my water as I listened to the radio on the counter. Someone I couldn't recognize was speaking, but I knew from the bits and pieces I picked up that they were talking about the treaties to be signed.

"All you do anymore is listen to that damned radio." Polly was stern and annoyed, but it didn't show on her face. She wouldn't dare let her wrinkles get a head start, and she maintained her ladylike expression. "Your mind get lost on the way back, Steve?"

"Marines have to keep up with this kind of thing. Besides, this is the best part—hearing about the justice being served."

I drank the last few sips of my water. And waited for Polly's calculated response. It was the same talk every meal we had. *Stop thinking about the war now that you're home. You know you're out of the Marines, right?* I was beyond sick of hearing it, especially since Polly brought it up every time as though it was an entirely new topic of discussion.

"This always comes down to your obsession with the Marines. I know they meant a lot to you, darling, but that's over now!"

"No, Polly. *Semper Fidelis* doesn't mean I'm a Marine one time and then done. It's a stamp on my soul, God forgive me, and nobody lets go of that kind of commitment."

Polly just rolled her eyes. We remained quiet while we waited for and ate our food. My Reuben sandwich was noticeably blander than I remember, but I guessed that it was just a side effect of the limits of food still placed on the nation due to the war.

"Hopefully everything would be back to normal soon." Polly sighed. "I'm tired of waiting on you."

"And I'm tired of waiting on you to shut your mouth." I knew my words stung like venom, but Polly remained motionless save for her eyes. Her blue eyes quivered like the snare of a beating drum, revealing her actual emotions. I sat quietly until she spoke.

"Be careful Steve." A tear welled up on the side of her eye. After saying that, Polly got up from her seat and left the diner. While the rest of the patrons looking at me with quizzical looks on their faces, I left the amount we owed plus tip on the table and got up myself.

I left without saying a thing. I walked across the street to the river, and continued walking beside it. Several people who walked past me attempted to thank me for my service or tell me about the end of the war, but I ignored them all and kept walking. It was a mild August day, and I was content to be by myself. I knew Polly's father would have someone there to pick her up within twenty minutes, so I didn't feel obligated to go after her to make sure she was alright. Call me cold, but that's what she got for being a spoiled bitch. She could just ask any random stranger for a phone, tell them who she was, and they'd either offer her a ride since they were a member or offer to call since everyone here either feared or respected the Klan.

I hadn't really thought about how terrible of a life choice I had made becoming engaged to Polly. She wasn't exactly likeable, she was dull, she cried too often, and was too manipulative. Donnie, on the other hand, was strong, robust, and proud. I didn't spend much time with her in person, but the stories Micah told me amazed me to no end.

Ronald was also an issue. Before going to war, I thought he was the end-all be-all master of my life. I mean, most fellas thought that the future father-in-law is the true authority of your life, especially one that is so connected to the Klan.

Afterwards, though, I knew it didn't really matter.

I continued to walk onwards along the river. The light of the day grew shorter and shorter as I passed shops, homes, and other buildings. Finally, I got to a set of train tracks going across the river. I had seen them plenty of times before, but never dared to walk on them. They seemed sturdy enough, but the fall to the river was definitely not something I wanted to mess with.

I got up on the tracks anyways just to try it out. Middletown wasn't the same for me. Or, rather, I wasn't the same for Middletown. I felt an encroaching sense of dread and hopelessness for my once beloved town, but I chalked it up to seeing how it actually was. It took Micah, Donnie, Moore, and a whole host of other things to get me to see everything how it actually was, and I hated it. I sat down on the tracks and let my feet swing in the open breeze. I wondered if I would see Micah if I jumped, but knew that would be the opposite of what he wanted for me.

"It's all just comings and goings, isn't it, Micah? You came into my life so suddenly and left even more suddenly, and for what?" I slammed my fist against the metal. "So you could do this to me?" My anger subsided as quickly as it had grown. I was known for my quick outbursts followed by lulls. "It all just comes... and goes." I took a deep breath and exhaled before getting up and getting off the tracks. Before I left, I gave a final goodbye to Micah, "Well, friend, I'll take your advice and get going."

"Leo, what's the matter?" I asked my sailor friend. He seemed pensive, but in an overall good mood.

"It's just so surreal! There's just so many people here for this! I honestly didn't expect so many people from Middletown to show up!" Leo was always so enthusiastic about this kind of thing with me. I guess he might not have other people to really express this kind of thing with though...

"Oh I know it!" I tried to make him feel welcome to his attitude of excitement even though I wasn't the biggest fan of parties. "It's such a strange thing to see everyone so cooperative." All around Leo and I were the survivors of the war, their families, and the families and friends of those less fortunate. The strangest thing was the mix of the crowd; there were black folks, white folks, and all kinds of people of different religions. "It's interesting to see the war bring people of all... *backgrounds*... together." Even the Sergis, and Italian family, showed up. I knew it must have been especially hard on them to lose their son and to take all of the flak they did for being Italian.

"Oh they're interesting to say the least. Helen's daughter, Ellie, has been doing better. Seems like forever ago I moved in with them, though I know it's only been a few years..." Leo's sentence was cut off short by a loud intrusion at the door. Unfortunately, I knew from the voices who it was exactly: Ronald and Charles.

"Where the hell is my nephew?" Charles yelled with his drawling voice.

I got up from my chair next to Leo and shouted back, "Over here Charles, let's take it outside." I got up and mentioned, "I'll be back, Leo. These two just want a quick word."

We all stepped outside of the building to have our chat. Ronald was taking a

few hits from his cigar, and Charles was just finishing up the bud of his last cig.

Ronald opened up, "Steve, Steve... what am I going to do with you? You can't just go around hurting my little girl's feelings—it's not the way gentlemen go about doing things."

I was hankering for some tobacco myself, but knew it would be rude of me to ask either of them for anything given the circumstances. It was probably that moment too where I got the idea to kick the habit.

Charles chimed in, "We both know your parents didn't raise no ruffian, bless their souls. But what's got you in this way of thinking?"

With militaristic directness, I stated, "I no longer feel like I am a part of this community. Something about the war did it in for me—I'm obviously not the same, and, there's something out there calling for me. Maybe it's another woman, maybe it's a sense of wanderlust. Even I don't know at this point. What I do know is that I'm going back into the Marines to be an officer."

Ronald interrupted, "But son, the war is done. Finished. What good would come from going back?" He rolled his cigar around in his mouth as he spoke.

"Even in peacetime, we are still needed. I miss it too, even with all of its challenges." I moved my hand my scarred battle-wound as I spoke. "I appreciate all that you've done for me. I truly do. I guess I've just grown up and out of this place."

Charles sighed and shifted his weight. "Well then there's nothing we can do for you, I reckon. War's got you all messed up in the head. Aint no doubt bout' that."

"I wouldn't say that Charles." I thought of Donnie in that moment and pondered over whether she would still want to meet me again. "But then again, I'm not going to argue with you. It's what my heart's telling me and I'm going to listen." I thought of Micah and the bridge. "I got a taste of the wide world and I can't hold myself back anymore. Life is just one long series of comings and goings, and I've sat still here for too long."

Charles spoke up, saying, "Well if that's your motto, you're going to have to come back some day. When you do, I'll be here for you. I know I ain't the brightest nor the kindest, but I raised you and I won't say no to my nephew." That struck me, and despite my inkling, I gave him and handshake and a hug.

"Not everyone can be perfect. I know I sure aren't." I gave Ronald a nod as he stood there, being quiet.

I turned around and went back inside the party. As I came back through the doors, I looked for Leo. I saw him, but with someone I hadn't seen in a very long time. I rushed over to them both with a smile of my face.

"Knight! I finally found you!" Donnie smile and offered a handshake, which I gladly accepted.

"Donnie! Wha....Whe....What are you doing here?"

"Well, it's actually a long story. Before Micah passed, he kept sending letters to me about how much you had changed. I couldn't believe my eyes, and when he left something for you in his will, I had to see it for myself."

Leo backed away to go join the group he came here with. "You two have a good time. Nice to meet you, Donnie!"

"Nice to meet you too, Leo! So here I am, finding you in Middletown, Indiana. You'll have to forgive me, it took me a lot longer to find you than I had

anticipated.”

“Well, here I am!”

Donnie smirked. “I half expected some kind of pathetically witty remark of how much ‘you enjoy having a stalker like me’ or something.”

“I can’t say I didn’t think of something similar, but I’ve learned how to keep my thoughts on the inside. I’ve gotten enough...crap... for doing otherwise.”

“Oooohh, you really are being a good Marine, now aren’t you?” She said that with slightly more sexual tension than she anticipated, but all we did was laugh embarrassingly. “Anyway, I came here to give this to you, and to see how you were.” She handed an envelope to me.

It was heavier for its size than I expected, and something obviously metallic was inside. I hastily opened the paper and pulled out an exquisitely carved letter opener. It was shaped like a bastard sword, and was engraved with *Semper Fidelis* on the blade.

“Holy moly. This looks magnificent.” I held the hilt up to my face to explore the dazzling gold and silver intertwining the handle.

“That was Micah’s favorite because I have the companion letter opener.

There are only two in the world, and they were made a very long time ago by an unknown person. He told me to only give it to you if you really were changed, and after seeing you and hearing about you from Leo, I can say that you really are changed, Steve.”

“Thank you, Donnie. You didn’t have to do this, but you did. I’m honored to accept this from you and Micah.” I smiled as I put the letter opener away. “However, you couldn’t come all this way without getting away without dancing, you know?” The band playing had just shifted its song to a slower piece, and that was what gave me the idea.

“Guess there are some things even war can’t change about you.” She took the hand I offered to her.

“It really just comes and goes, Donnie. Everything just comes and goes.”

## Part 3

# Escaping from Community Activities

“Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”

-- John Lennon, “Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)”

# Change is Coming

Kristal All

(1968)

"I hate this damn war. *Selective* is right," I ranted to Clark as we left the Selective Service office. "They only select the people they don't care about here. They don't care about us. We're just poor working blacks in the middle of nowhere. The only time they pay attention to us is when they need fall guys."

Yesterday was Clark's eighteenth birthday, so we walked to the office where he had to sign his life away. Now Clark and I were both on Uncle Sam's list, and I still wasn't too thrilled about it.

"I know, Roy," Clark replied bitterly. "But what else are they gonna do? They've always sent people like us to fight. They would have no chance if they sent the passive rich white people."

Clark and I had been best friends since we were kids. Our families went to the same church, and even though I was two years older than him, we had so much in common that we were practically inseparable all our lives. As we walked around the colorful swings toward the pristine picnic tables on the west side of McCulloch Park, I thought about our long friendship. We had lived on the same street all our lives, and we always played baseball and football around the neighborhood and played pranks on the other kids who lived near us. Even though I was older, that didn't matter anymore since we were both considered "adults" now.

We should have hung out on the east side of McCulloch Park, which was just down the street from where we lived. That was where the black people tended to stay, even though all it had was a rusty playground and an overgrown tennis court. We were expected to stay on our side, while the white people stayed on the west side. But even with its shitty equipment, there were always BBQ's and gatherings on the east side in the summer. Being early April, we still had a few weeks before the weather was nice enough to start those up again. It rained earlier this week; but today was nice enough for Clark and I to walk around.

I loved walking along the White River in spring, because it actually looked kind of nice for once. Instead of being flooded with trash and leaves, it had some flowers and geese. There was still trash, but it always seemed like there wasn't as much.

"Roy, do you think we will get drafted?" Clark asked as we sat down at one



of the nice picnic tables in McCulloch Park. "I mean, I know that half the guys we know have joined the army, but do you think *we* will?"

"I don't know, man. But I know that I'm not going unless I have to. I'd rather not die in some messed up country before I've even done anything with my life. Besides, we've got plans."

Clark and I decided a while ago that we wanted to own our own business when we grew up. I was a sophomore at Middletown University, and Clark was enrolled to go there in the fall.

Just then, a few white guys with their leather jackets covering their puffed up shoulders stomped toward us. Knowing what was coming, I rolled my eyes at Clark and muttered, "Here we go again."

"What are you two doing here?" The lead kid asked haughtily.

"Just sitting here trying to enjoy the sunshine," I told him confidently. I saw Clark look down at the table.

"Looks like they've got a bit too much sun," another guy chuckled to the others. "Burnt them right to a crisp."

The other guys laughed, and the first one looked back at us and spat, "We don't like Negros getting our nice park all dirty. Why don't y'all go back to your shacks?"

That pushed me to the edge. Even though we were stuck in a crowded neighborhood and our houses were only as good as we could make them, I hated when white kids acted as though they were superior to us.

"We've got as much right to be here as you do. In case you hadn't heard, this public park is supposed to be public for everyone. President Johnson said that four years ago, and if you weren't so slow on picking up the news, you'd realize that."

"Roy," Clark glanced up at me. "It ain't worth it, let's just go back to our side."

One of the white boys said threateningly, "You best listen to your friend here. This park won't be integrated as long as I'm here. I don't care what sort of laws the president made. Washington is pretty far away from Middletown."

I stood up to face the kid, but Clark stood up right after me and grabbed my arm. "Let's go," he said. "It looks like it might rain anyway."

Reluctantly, I backed away slowly and walked with Clark across the park and back east into Whitely Territory.

"I hate it when we aren't doing anything wrong, just minding our own business, and those selfish bastards treat us like trash!" I practically growled at Clark. "Why didn't you let me beat the shit out of them?"

"It's okay, Roy. Just calm down. You don't need to get arrested. We've still got to graduate and start college. You know you can't let your temper ruin your life."

I didn't say anything because I knew he was right. We walked in silence back to our street, and my thoughts turned back to the Vietnam War and the draft.

"Listen, Clark," I said. "We shouldn't focus on this dumb war in Vietnam. I don't want either of us to die for something that has nothing to do with us. The best thing we can do is make people realize that black people can't be the fall guys for everything that goes wrong in this country. We have rights, and we need to make people see that."

Clark hesitated before responding. "But don't you think we've come so far already? People have been protesting in the south, Johnson has already outlawed segregation. There's not much we can do other than wait for change. Things aren't so bad here in Middletown. We're even going to college!"

Clark and I rarely disagree, but I couldn't take his side this time. "Don't you see, though, that going to college isn't enough? We are only two people. I only know maybe 10 other black guys going to Middletown University. We need to help the people who are already protesting. We have to show people that there are people in Middletown like those white kids who treat us like shit. I'm sick of it."

"Me too, I guess," mumbled Clark. I could tell he wasn't completely on board but didn't want to argue. We walked the rest of the way home in silence, only nodding goodbye when we entered our separate houses.

The next day, I sat at the kitchen table eating a turkey sandwich as I read the paper announcing yet again that Robert Kennedy was coming to Middletown. I heard the front door open and my mom come in like she did every night after work, setting her keys on the shelf in the hallway.

"Roy, are you here?" she called. I heard her take off her jacket and shoes and walk toward the living room.

"I'm in the kitchen, Mom," I replied.

"How was school, Little College Man?" She gave me a big hug with her tiny body, and a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Will you stop calling me that? I'm nearly a junior now, and I am way taller than you," I said proudly. "School's fine."

"Just remember, Roy, that you are still my baby, no matter how tall you get or how much you think you know," she retorted. "What are you reading?"

"Nothing new, just more excitement about Bobby Kennedy's visit," I said as I handed her the paper. "Everyone on campus is talking about it. I convinced Clark to go hear him. Do you wanna come?"

"I don't think so. I will probably just listen to the radio broadcast his speech. I don't want to put this old body through the stress of the crowd."

Mom was always complaining about her old body. It kept her from taking me to the carnival when I was younger, just like it prevented her from doing all the other things she didn't like. The only thing she likes to do is go to church on Sundays, and she only did that because she was afraid of what God might do to her if she missed. Once I asked her why she never once skipped church, and the only reply I got was, "Roy, my old body is full of bad parts. I've got rusty knees, slow muscles, and a short fuse. If I don't go to church, God might just make things worse, and I don't know how much worse I could get." She was only 50, but acted like she was 90.

"Aww, come on, you know you aren't that old," I told her, even though I knew it wouldn't change her mind. "But I don't blame you for wanting to avoid all the people. It sounds like all of Middletown will be there. But I am interested to hear what he has to say. Word is that he has some new ideas about the war in Vietnam. I need to know if I'm still going to be a likely candidate for being drafted."

"I've been praying every night for God to keep you safe and away from that war. But you know as well as I do that there's always a chance you will have to

go,” my mother began. “And now poor Clark is at risk. I was talking with his mom about it and we decided to start up a prayer circle for all you boys. I know God will do what’s right.”

I didn’t have as much faith in God’s draft preferences as Mom did, but I didn’t bother arguing. It was true that the risk was high. The war got more serious with each poor kid that got drafted. The white people made all the political decisions while all the black people got stuck fighting. I also knew that I couldn’t afford to get drafted, especially since all our money went into paying off the house and my loans. Mom had been working two jobs since I started high school, and that was barely enough.

“The whole thing just isn’t fair, and I wish we would change some things. How come we are always stuck with the shitty jobs and the low expectations? I am sick of the war, sick of worrying about the present so much that I can’t worry about the future. Change is coming, Mom, I know it. This month’s issue of *The Crisis* had lots of news of students protesting the war. They’re fighting to have a fighting chance of having a better future. Hell, with all that stuff happening out there, maybe Middletown University and the whole state of Indiana will get on board. I swear, change is coming, and it feels like it’s coming soon.”

She listened patiently as I rambled on idealistically. Then she said gravely, “Yeah, but there was also that article about those three black college kids shot during a riot in South Carolina. They had the same intentions as you do about bringing awareness and black representation on the rise, but now they’re dead.”

Mom looked at me with a serious expression. I couldn’t help but feel bad, knowing that I worried her with all my talks of protests and marches.

“Can’t you see that this is for the good of everyone?” I asked. “People have died, but more people will suffer and die if I don’t help change things. Besides, dying seems to be the only way to get anyone’s attention.”

Mom sank into a chair beside me and put her hand on my arm. “Roy, I don’t want to see you get hurt. Lord knows that those poor kids’ deaths will hopefully change something around there, but I don’t want that to happen to you.”

“Mom,” I said, looking into her eyes. “I will be careful. Me and the other guys in the Black Student Union have already got some attention at the convocation for the president of Middletown University when we walked out as one just before the president took the stage. No one got hurt. They took our petition and are going to try to figure out a solution to the housing problem.”

Middletown University, like most other colleges, has never given equal opportunities for all students looking for housing. All the apartments closest to campus have rules against letting blacks live there. That’s why I have to live at home, and why there aren’t many black people enrolled who don’t already live in Middletown.

“I’m doing something good, Mom,” I continued. “I won’t get hurt.”

Mom smiled slightly but kept a serious expression. “Lord only knows what will happen. My old body can’t take it.”

I raised an eyebrow at her, acknowledging her old complaint, and she asked, “What about Clark? He’s not skipping school, marching around town telling people to join the NAACP and sign petitions. That boy has his head on straight, and you would do well to follow his example.”

“Clark doesn’t think there’s a race problem in Middletown. He ignores the

names white people call us, the times they refuse to serve us, and the lies they spread about us. He doesn't think we can change anything, and doesn't see why I'm even trying."

"I see what you're doing, honey, and I'm proud of you. But it's a fool's errand trying to change everyone's minds, even here in Middletown. It won't happen entirely, especially not very soon. It was less than 40 years ago when they last lynched a couple young black men near here. I was 12 when that happened. There were big ugly birds gathering in the sky waiting for a chance to claim the bodies. I remember when our whole neighborhood stayed up all night outside the church where they were preparing the bodies for the funeral. The white people didn't want them anywhere near here. Heck, those boys would have been left in the trees forever if a good pastor hadn't fought so hard to give them the respect they deserved. There may have been even more chaos if we hadn't defended them. Thankfully there hasn't been anything that bad since then. But there has always been a huge divide between the black and the white people here. There might always be."

I'd heard this story before, but never had my mom explained to me what it was like to actually be there. She liked to me optimistic about her childhood, and had never shared the tragedies she grew up around. Somehow it was hard to hear her, a woman who rarely complained about this town, acknowledge the problems that existed.

All I could do was reassure her that her that everything would get better.

"You'll see, Mom," I said. "I'm changing things. We are so close to getting real recognition, I just know it. We just need the right people involved. Change is coming."

"No matter how much you yell at me, I can't let you in the gym until 3 o'clock."

The girl looked at me as though I had just told her that her wedding was cancelled. She had that indecisive look in her eye that made me wonder if she was considering trying to push her way passed me, as though I would let her through if she stepped closely enough. That wouldn't work on me. I knew I shouldn't touch white girls, but I had to do my job.

"Just come back in two hours. You will see Senator Kennedy then, but no sooner. Besides, he isn't even here yet," I told her with a certain air of finality in my voice indicating that she should leave.

Normally I enjoyed my job. I had worked at the Men's Gym for nearly two semesters, and aside from checking in those active students determined to keep up their new years resolutions and look better for summer, there wasn't much for me to do. Usually on Thursdays, I went straight from my economics class to the gym, put on my nametag, and reported to my supervisor to see what I had to do. Sometimes if he was in a bad mood I had to clean the locker rooms or wash the sweaty towels. But most of the time I just made my rounds and made sure everything was in order and everyone had what they needed.

I had plenty of time to think and keep to myself while I worked. Lately I'd been so focused on campaigning around town, trying to get people to care about the issues. It wasn't fair what was happening to us blacks. We worked too hard and never got any respect. But no one here seemed to care. The white people

didn't want to change anything, and the black people seemed to lie down and accept it. I knew that Dr. King thought that staying peaceful would lead to change, but it just seemed like a waste. So I had been trying to get the people of Middletown to react.

Mom still hadn't done much to support the cause. "I'll pray about it," she said every time I brought it up. I never had the heart to argue that sometimes praying just wasn't enough. She worried too much about me, but never did much to help me. We went to a tamer church than some others. Shaffer Chapel, for instance, encouraged its black members to stand up for themselves. I wanted Mom to help revolutionize the one we attended, but she was stuck in her "prayerful reflection" of what God wanted her to do. So far God hadn't told her to do anything but worry about me putting myself in too much danger.

A small circle of revolutionaries had only gotten me so far. I worked hard to increase NAACP membership and grow our local causes, but was hard. There were too many people like Clark who ignored what was happening. Too many people like my mom who thought it was someone else's duty to change things. I was constantly trying to change people's minds. It made me so busy that I could hardly think of anything else, which was why Professor Ross was on my case.

"Roy, you seem distracted lately," Professor Ross said.

"I'm sorry, sir," I replied, "I've just had a lot on my mind, you know, staying really busy around town."

"Well, whatever is going on, you can't let it take over all your time. Make sure that you leave time for homework. You know you can't afford to let your grade slip any more, and you have used all of your allowed absences," he said.

"Yes, sir. I'll work on that, and I will try not to miss any more days."

He didn't know anything. He just didn't get it. He thought I already failed; he thought I had no chance. And why would I? The damn draft was still going on. If I didn't get at least a B in his class, I would be on the list. Normally I'd be fine – I knew this stuff. His class wasn't too hard or anything, I had just been too busy to put homework first. I spent so much time talking with people and leading the protests here in Middletown. With Middletown in such an isolated area, it was hard to make people realize that black struggles were universal. Clark barely saw this, and I always had to drag him to campaigns and civil rights protests. I couldn't believe that he still ignored any discrimination he experienced.

I thought about my conversation with Professor Ross as I stood by the doors to the gym floor where Robert Kennedy would be speaking. Then another group of white college kids approached with eager faces.

One guy took his cigarette out of his mouth and asked, "Is he here yet?" They all tried to look passed me, but of course couldn't see anything.

"No, but he will be in a couple hours. The speech starts at 5:30, and the doors open at 3," the words I had repeated too many times flowed out of my mouth with my usual customer service inflection. I tried to keep the fake smile on my face.

"Why don't you let us in, now?" he asked in a less excited, more threatening voice. He stepped close to me and flicked some ashes onto the ground near my feet.

"I'm sorry sir, but they are still setting up the stage and equipment," I said without changing the tone of my voice. Hopefully they would go away without

any trouble.

"We are going to wait right here on the steps until they finish, then," he replied. I smiled courteously at him and cursed him out in my head. As he turned away, he said sarcastically to his friends, "We wouldn't want to give the help any trouble, now. Let's just let it do its job."

Keeping the fake smile on my face, I let the comment slide. I was working, and I didn't want to get fired because I yelled at a stupid white boy for another racist comment. It was much easier and smarter to keep to myself.

I wish they hadn't switched locations to the Men's Gym. The auditorium was more comfortable, but since so many people wanted to hear the presidential campaign speech, the administrators decided to have it in the larger building. Apparently there were people coming from all over Indiana and even Ohio to hear Robert Kennedy speak. There would probably be thousands of us crowded in there.

Clark told me that Kennedy has some ideas for a policy change that affects college kids. That was what got Clark interested in hearing the speech. I wanted Kennedy to acknowledge the racial problems in America and see that Indiana was just as segregated as the states in the south. But I also wanted to hear what he thought about the draft. I was sick of listening to see if my number was called, sick of knowing that if I don't get good enough grades then I would be even likelier to get drafted. Maybe Kennedy would exempt all college students from the war. If not, I would protest until someone did. I don't want to go to Vietnam. That'd be an awful place to die.

Finally one of my coworkers let me know that everything was set for the senator's arrival. He was due to arrive in 20 minutes. Members of his security team were already working on controlling the crowd. I helped them direct the crowd of people into the gym in as orderly a fashion as possible given the mass number of people in attendance. I was relieved to see more black people than I expected making their way through the doors. If Robert Kennedy saw that the large population of us here in Middletown supported him, then maybe he would keep pushing the Civil Rights Movement forward.

I waited as everyone sat down and the buzzing sound of excitement filled the room. I had never seen so many people in one place, confined in such a small area. Not even at the fair did it seem like so many people could be together. I made sure I was not supposed to do anything else, then clocked out of work. I couldn't find Clark in the crowd, so I took a seat in the back of the gym. I hadn't realized until now that I was excited. Middletown wasn't exactly a place where celebrities visited, let alone presidential candidates. It was a regular, boring, mid-American city that was easily overlooked. I had no idea who was able to get Senator Kennedy to come here, but they did a good job. I bet more people would vote this year than ever before.

An older man next to me leaned over and muttered, "This ought to be good. I hope he wants to lower the taxes. He seems like an honest kid."

"That's what my impression is, too," I replied. "I hope he's understandable. Lowering taxes would be nice, especially if that means he would stop the war. It has taken over the nation, and I haven't heard one good thing that's come of it."

The old man nodded and leaned back in his seat. Just then, screams and cheering erupted in the mass of people, and many leapt to their feet to get a better

glimpse at our guest of honor. Robert Kennedy, his wife, and a dozen other people made their way toward the stage at the front, smiling and waving at everyone as they passed.

He looked even more official than he did in pictures. He was cool and clean, and he walked with a confident stride that radiated potential. Already I was impressed with him and could envision him as our nation's political leader. One day he's in a stuffy gym in central Indiana, the next he could be in the oval office.

The applause continued until he got to the podium and greeted everyone. Then we all gradually settled back into our seats in anticipation of whatever wisdom we were about to receive.

"Here we go," the man beside me whispered as Senator Robert Kennedy cleared his throat to speak.

When I got home soon after the speech and began to tell Mom about it, I realized that I couldn't remember the details of it. It was an interesting speech, but it all blurred together. She had listened to him on the radio, and wanted me to fill in the gaps of what she wasn't able to see.

"I noticed that he fidgeted a lot," I told Mom as we sat on the couch sipping hot chocolate. "He was confident, but I could tell he was slightly nervous."

"The Kennedys are always confident," Mom said with a smirk. "They've had their troubles and misguided political ideas, but they know how to impress people. What else happened?"

I took a sip of my hot chocolate and said, "The crowd was going crazy. He had to pause every 10 seconds because people would cheer after everything he said. At one point he asked the people closest to him to settle down and stay in their seats because the people behind them couldn't see. They were a lot of white girls crowding to get closer to him. They all swooned and he didn't even act like he recognized it."

"I bet Ethel wasn't too pleased with that," Mom said matter-of-factly.

"Honestly, she seemed kind of bored the whole time. Like she was in her own world of thoughts or something."

"Poor girl. I'd hate to be a politician's wife. You'd never know when he was telling the truth, and someone would always hate his every decision." She stirred her hot chocolate absently and continued. "No thanks, I'm happy just as I am without a husband at all, just a smart Little College Man."

I smiled at her, knowing that she was telling the truth. In all my life, I had never seen a single mother as happy as her. She worked hard almost every day, but never complained. I was a pretty easy kid to raise, but couldn't help but feel guilty that I wasn't working as hard as I should be in school. I knew that she would rather know that I was safe studying than out protesting, but I knew that I wouldn't be satisfied if nothing changed in the world.

"The radio cut out for a while with a bunch of static. Did I miss anything else he said?" she asked.

"He really supported mutual understanding. I respect him for that. He talked about how we need to learn from past mistakes and make a better future. Most of it was about race and discrimination. Exactly what I want to hear from a future president."

Mom set down her mug and turned on the television to the local news station. "I

wonder if they will show a video of the speech. I wouldn't mind seeing it myself."

Just then, we saw Robert Kennedy on the screen, looking poised to give another speech.

"He must be really busy if he is already giving another speech," I noted. "He left for Indy right after the question and answer session earlier."

Kennedy was standing in the back of a pickup truck, and looked too serious.

"I have some very sad news for all of you," he began, patting his well-groomed hair. "And I think, sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world. And that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis Tennessee."

"Oh my Lord," Mom said, placing a hand over her heart and the other one covering her open mouth.

My insides instantly seized up, and I held my breath. This couldn't be happening. Dr. King was a peaceful person. He never hurt anyone. He couldn't be dead. Thoughts ran through my head as I listened to the screams echoing from the crowd in Indianapolis through the television set. What will happen now? Who did this? How dare they? Is this true?

Mom reached over and held my hand. I looked over at her and saw that she had tears in her eyes. I put my arm around her and focused back on what Kennedy was saying.

"This is a difficult time for the United States. It's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. We can be angry and move toward revenge, or we can take the route that Martin Luther King did, and move toward understanding. I can also feel in my own heart the desire for revenge. I had a member of my family killed. But we have to make an effort in the United States. An effort to understand. To go beyond these rather difficult times."

I hated this. My head was exploding with anger. Martin Luther King hadn't done anything wrong. This wasn't fair. I wanted to scream at something but didn't want to miss anything important, so I bit my tongue and kept listening.

"What we need in the US is not division. What we need in the US is not hatred. What we need in the US is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another. We need a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or black."

No shit. A scream was still trying to escape, so I bit my tongue harder. Kennedy can't be serious. It was one thing to say you want wisdom and compassion, but it was another thing entirely to do it. He couldn't expect people not to get violent. I myself wanted to punch something or someone.

The crowd on screen cheered their support and I asked, "How dare they? Who would do this? Why would they do this?"

She only shook her head and kept watching the speech.

"It is not the end of violence," Kennedy concluded. "It is not the end of lawlessness. It is not the end of disorder. But the vast majority of people want to live together and have justice. Let us say a prayer for our country and our people."

The news broadcaster filled the screen and expanded the news. Apparently Martin Luther King was assassinated only a short while ago at the motel where he was staying in Memphis. People were remaining calm in the Indianapolis area, unlike other cities with large black populations, who were rioting and violently



reacting to the news.

Mom shook her head again and said, "That won't help anything. I can't believe this happened. Those damned fools aren't making anything better by tearing things up and hurting people."

"Maybe not, but it sure feels better to take your anger out on something," I replied. "If I ran into the bastard who shot him, I don't know what I'd do."

I started to stand up, but Mom kept a tight grip on my hand.

"Roy Michael Carter, you sit down," she told me firmly. "Don't even think about doing anything stupid."

"Mom, I have to do something. This just isn't right."

"You've worked so hard to get everyone interested in the Movement," she said. "Now people might listen to what you have to say. But you have to be smart about it. Don't go trying to stir up riots here. I don't want you to get killed."

"I can't sit around and wait for this to be over," I argued. "People can't forget about this. I'm not going to let everyone in Middletown ignore what just happened. We've ignored too much racism already."

"I know, Roy," Mom said in a pacifying voice. "This is terrible. But what Bobby Kennedy just said is true. We need to stay calm and nonviolent. Plan things out instead of storming the streets."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I turned off the TV and sat thinking until the phone rang. I got up and answered it with a shaky "Hello?" and Clark's voice filled my ear.

"Did you hear? Oh my God. Oh my God! This is awful!"

"I know, I know, I know," I repeated rapidly. "This changes everything." My emotions were all over the place. I was still angry, yet oddly hopeful.

"I never thought this would happen. Nothing this big, anyway," Clark said in a scared voice. In spite of the tragedy, I couldn't help but feel a bit of satisfaction that Clark was finally starting to get it. He then asked, "What are we going to do?"

"We?" I repeated. "Does this mean you want to help?"

Clark sighed. "Look, Roy, I'm sorry I haven't really been supportive lately. You spend so much time on organizing protests and petitions, and I couldn't risk getting involved. You know how much I needed to focus on schoolwork. It doesn't come as naturally to me as it does for you. But I thought that by ignoring what was happening, people would calm down."

"I've told you so many times that it can't just go away. Unless we do something about it, white people will always walk all over us. They will think they're better than us. We will be restricted to the shitty side of town, we won't get to go everywhere they can go, and we will always have to watch our backs in case someone will hurt us."

I heard Clark sniffle quietly before responding. "I know... It was way easier not to get involved. But what are we going to do now? My mom is freaking out, and my little sisters don't even understand what happened. What can we do?"

"I don't know. Right now, we have to stay calm, though. There's no way my mom would let me do anything tonight. Why don't we meet tomorrow so we have more information and can think of a way to get more people in Middletown involved?"

"Okay," Clark agreed. "Did you see what was happening in Chicago?"

They're going crazy up there."

"Who knew we'd be thankful to live in boring old Middletown," I smiled a bit. "For once it's best that nothing happens here. But tomorrow, we've got to change that. Marches, petitions, walk-outs, anything that will make people listen."

Mom listened from the couch, no doubt saying a prayer for everything to work itself out. I couldn't look her in the eyes, knowing that she wouldn't like what I was going to do.

"Listen, Clark, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Bye, Roy. Stay safe."

I hung up the phone and walked back over to sit beside my mom.

"Mom, I promise I'll be careful."

"Roy, honey, I know that I can't stop you from doing anything. But I couldn't live with myself if something bad happened to you. My old body would give up on me if I lost you."

"Mom, I know, I just—"

"Listen," she interrupted. "Now I know that you won't be able to sit still, so I will support whatever you do. But I need you to go slowly and carefully into this big mess. The man who has done such kind, peaceful things to bring the races together was killed. That means people won't hold back anything anymore. But you need to honor what he did already, and stay on the peaceful side of protesting. I'd let you go to jail in a heartbeat if I find out that you hurt anyone. You can't heal pain by inflicting pain on others. You understand?"

I was surprised by how honestly and steadily she spoke. My mom had always tried to get me to stay out of the protests, but now she was giving me advice on how to protest. She no longer had any trace of tears.

"Yes, ma'am." I nodded seriously.

She gave me a hug and slowly got up, and before she left the room, said, "I'm proud of you, Roy. And you know how much I love you."

"Love you, Mom," I said. I knew that I kept her up later than she normally stayed up, but I was glad to know that I had her support. Today had been a long day, but I wasn't tired enough to go to bed yet. I picked up the latest issue of *The Crisis* from the end table where I left it a few days ago, and started reading it with a new sense of vigor. Tomorrow would be different. I knew that big changes were coming to Middletown.

# Political Masks

Chris Hunley

(1984)

I can't believe that today is the day. After everything that has happened, after months of work, everything comes down to today. Today is Election Day. Just thinking about it makes me nervous. I was already on edge as it was, I didn't need to add to my nerves. Damn. I need a drink.

I pour myself a glass of whiskey and switched on the television to the news. Seeing nothing about the election, I tuned the newscaster out and took a sip of my whiskey. I swear these damn nerve are going to be the death of me. Either that or I am going to be killed in the line of duty.

Well it's not like I haven't been shot at before...I just never had a fatal wound before. Being the sheriff of Middletown is not always the easiest job in the world. Those days are behind me now. I am making my stake in politics and hopefully I become mayor. The bad part about politics, at least for me, is that my main obstacle isn't beating my opponent...its beating my past.

Yes, it is so secret that every politician has some sort of a past. Well I am no exception. I was arrested and tried for bribery and gambling in 1972. The gambling charges were dropped and when I was tried for bribery I was found innocent. However, in a small town like Middletown a reputation like that stays with you for your entire life.

It had been eleven years since the trial and people were still talking about it like it just fucking happened yesterday! You would think that people would get bored with the topic but NOOOOOOO. It's like the longer people talk about it the more interested people become with it. I just want people to shut up and let me live my life. I mess up and it goes down in the town history. I make the most arrests of the decade and keep our town safe and people shrug it off as part of my job. Hypocrites.

I honestly don't know how I got through these last few months. It has been pure hell. Running for office means that you have to present yourself in a certain way and make sure that people like you. Well the people of Middletown don't exactly like me. I mean I am talked about a lot, but I am not usually talked about in a good light. So this just added a new level of hell for me. I had to put on a nice suit and pull out my best smile because I knew that everyone was going to be watching me like a hawk and if I fucked up even once I was done for. I had to

watch my every move. I had a very close call during the last leg of my campaign though.

I was visiting Middletown University for the day, campaigning a bit before my debate at Irvings Auditorium against my opponent Allen Wilson that night. I was feeling fairly confident that I would do well in the debate until I ran into Allen who apparently had the same idea I did...either that or his campaign manager did. My bet was on the latter. We exchanged friendly greetings and I turned to leave, glad to have dodged that bullet. Politicians can sometimes get territorial when they are campaigning. I was not about to have a pissing contest.

About an hour before the debate started I headed over to the auditorium to greet people as they walk in and make small talk. I really had to pull out all the stops if I was going to win this election. I needed to make sure that I had my best smile on while still maintaining a poker face, something that was very hard to master, because I couldn't let people know that all the things that they say about me and the trial actually get to me from time to time.

After some small talk, fake smile, fake laughs, baby kissing and general ass kissing I went behind the stage so that my team could put some stage makeup on me. You can't be caught in the limelight looking like you are going to fall over dead in two seconds. Those lights bring out your every flaw. Stage makeup is an absolute must unless you want to be remembered for something other than the reason why you are up on that stage. I mean just take a look at that awful Nixon vs Kennedy debate. Yikes! I am sure glad that wasn't me

It seemed like only seconds later that I was out on stage standing behind a podium giving my open argument against Allen for some issue. The questionnaire started off easy enough, asking what we sought to accomplish if we were elected into office.

I smirked a little because I was fully prepared of this question, plus it was the easiest question in the world. I was given the chance to go first. I stood tall and faced the crowd as I said "If elected to office I am looking to help the working man. If we help the working man than we help the economy. I plan to help the working man by expanding more jobs. Middletown was once a wealthy and thriving town. We can become that again if we all come together to work for a common cause."

By the time I finished my little speech, it was time for Allen to answer the question. However Allen decided to use this time to deliver a blow below the belt and bring up the fact that I had been arrested and tried for bribery and gambling. This was a running theme in his campaign. Make him look like a God fearing family man and make me out to be the one who was arrested.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, how I really don't know. I calmly and smoothly gave my practiced answer of "I was acquitted on all charges. Would you like to talk about the rest of my career as sheriff?" This shut him up on the topic...for now. I mean what could he really say? I had one major fuckup and a career that generally speaks for itself. The only problem is that the people of this town like to pick at the one bad thing that you do and never mention all the good that you have done.

The rest of the debate went on without a hitch and inside I was breathing a sigh of relief that I had made it through the debate. I was still reeling a bit from Allen bringing up the trial though. Like who did he think he was? Jesus Christ

back from the dead? Like what gave him the right to ever try to make me out to be the bad guy? It's not like everyone didn't already know about that stupid trial. Like there was no need for him to bring that up during the debate other than to try to get under my skin and really piss me off.

Ugh. I hate this town sometimes. I have devoted most of my life to protecting this town and this is the thanks that I get. Being talked about for eleven years because I messed up one time. I have taken bullet for this town that have now become scars; reminders of who I use to be. These people just irk me. Like don't you have anything better to do than to sit around and gossip about something that happened eleven years ago? Apparently not.

It is times like these that I don't know why I am even running for mayor. Like the only thing that this is accomplishing is making me slowly go insane. Maybe in some weird way I am trying to prove myself to this town; trying to remind this town of all the good that I have done and that I am more than just my past mistake. Such a weird thought because I like to believe that I don't care what people think of me. I'd like to believe that.

Once the debate concludes, I go backstage and wash off my stage makeup before I go back out the auditorium for more ass kissing. This was the hardest part of the campaign process. Looking people in the eye and putting on and smile while making small talk, all the time knowing that the person standing in front of me was talking shit about me not five minutes before I got there.

Poker face. That is what I have to always have on. Complete with a fake smile. God! Why the fuck did I decide to run for mayor again? Make a change? Yeah, I think it was some bullshit like that. This is just complete torture. I swear that if I don't win this damn election I am going to set fire to this town and watch it burn.

The newscaster on the television brought me back to reality. He was saying something about the election, but I couldn't hear him. I turned up the volume and listened to what he was saying. Damn, it was just a false alarm. Luckily, the votes should be counted up within an hour or so.

I sigh and took a sip of my whiskey, trying to calm my nerves. There was something about all this waiting that wasn't fun at all. However, I was trying to remind myself how hard that I had worked to get here. It wasn't like I had done all of this ass kissing for nothing. I really wanted to win this election and try to make a real difference in this town.

Middletown was once a great town to live in. However, once the factories shut down people moved and the town started downhill. I want to help get this town back on its feet the way that it was in its glory day. The only thing that I need to do was to be elected mayor. The only thing that was standing in the way of that is my past. I just hope that I kissed enough ass to be elected.

I finished my glass of whiskey and was just about to pour myself another glass before the newscaster came in with breaking news. The ballots had been counted! I instantly am on the edge of my chair. This was the moment. This is what I had been waiting for. This is what I had been working for.

It seems like forever before the newscaster reveals that the election was extremely close. 51% to 49%. Then I heard the newscaster reveal the winner of the election. James Carey. My jaw dropped and I let out that breath of air I didn't even know that I was holding.

# The End of All Things and Also the Beginning

Rachel Crawley

(1966)

God, she's fucking beautiful.

How I managed to end up here, I still don't know. Lying on this mattress on the floor of this tiny apartment in Indianapolis, next to the most amazing human I've met in my eighteen years. Her curls splayed out on the floral sheets--she could be sleeping in a garden.

It's weird to watch her sleep, right? But all I can think is how this is exactly the way I wanna wake up every day for the rest of forever. Maybe not in Indianapolis... But who knows. The way the sun's hitting her face right now could probably persuade me to do anything.

Maggie looks nothing like Nancy Sinatra. She's taller and curvier and curlier and louder. But "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" was playing the first time I saw her, and it was like the universe was calling out to me. Now, "These Boots" is not exactly a love song--and by "not exactly" I mean it's not. But it is a sexy song, and there would be plenty of time for love later. I was attracted to her energy immediately. Totally out of my comfort zone at this anti-war rally-turned-after-party, her warmth drew me in. No way was I going to introduce myself, but I managed to hover in her general vicinity until she noticed me and said what I couldn't: "Hi."

She liked me, too--I could tell. ("I've never met a 'Julia' before," she said. "What a beautiful name.") I made a bad joke, and she laughed anyway. She touched my arm, and it sent electricity through us both. Months later she would tell me how nervous she had been--how cool and collected I seemed in contrast to her wild heat. I'd thought she *had* to know how nervous I was. I was so excited to talk about the war with someone, and I was just trying not to scare her away. If I knew then that I loved her--or would love her--that knowledge was swallowed by my desperation to just hold onto this person I could *talk to*. And, anyway, I think that's probably where love often begins.

We tucked away into a corner and just talked. I told her my parents didn't want to talk about anything--god forbid the war--god forbid being *against* the war. She told me her older brother signed up for the Marines as fast as he could. We were scared, and we didn't know what to do, and we were trying to do some-

thing, anyway.

She was twenty and had been sort of floating around since graduating high school. She said college didn't really make sense for her, and I was exhilarated to meet someone living outside of the plan my parents had for me and the plan my friends' parents had for them. I was going to graduate in June and stay at home and attend Middletown University in the fall. Right?

I'm making coffee, and Maggie stirs. I worry I was being too loud, but--

"It's so nice being woken up by the sun," she says. "Let's go somewhere it's always spring."

"You mean there are places in the world where it doesn't hurt to be outside four months out of the year?"

She chuckles, mumbles something affirmative into my neck, and wraps the bed sheet around both of us. I've gotten used to her presence over the last few months, but I don't think I'll ever tire of it. My parents are physically distant as well as emotionally, so I didn't grow up with a lot of hugging. Boy, was I missing out.

"Are you excited for tonight? Nervous?" she asks.

"Something like that," I say. It's prom night. As far as Ed and Rosemary Thornburg, those precious parents of mine, know, their beloved daughter Julia will be dancing her heart out with some baseball player named Josh. Getting the "complete" "high school" "experience." Or something. In reality, I'll be at a protest with the ever-lovely Margaret Evans. Probably not in an evening gown, but I guess we'll see.

We've been going to little rallies and call-out meetings together ever since that first one in February, but the one tonight is different. We're finally doing something instead of just talking about it, and it's supposed to have the biggest turnout yet. So, maybe crowds are not my favorite thing. So, maybe I'm a little nervous. But honestly it just feels good to be *doing something*. I have all this energy that was just driving me crazy before I gave it a direction, before Maggie helped me focus it. There's something wrong with this country for having this war at all, and there's something wrong with my parents and the people of Middletown for not speaking up. I have to speak up.

"JULES!" I can hear Maggie screaming. "JULIA!!" Just my name, over and over. I scream back, but I can't see her. I can't even tell where her voice is coming from. We weren't supposed to get separated. None of this was supposed to happen.

But what does that even mean--"supposed to." "Supposed to" doesn't mean shit when you're being pushed into the backseat of a cop car and the great love of your tiny, huge life is screaming for you somewhere you can't help her.

I'd spend most weekends in Indy with her, but we'd sit in my bedroom in Middletown on weekday afternoons when she wasn't working. My bedroom and my backyard and down by the river and the library and the diner. Anywhere. We'd sit anywhere in Indiana and talk about being anywhere else.

Middletown is the only home I've ever known. And, okay, surely there are worse places to live. Maggie thinks I have Stockholm Syndrome, but I do truly

love it. She talks about leaving, though, and I can't help but wonder if I need to get out. We could go somewhere with better weather, better politics, better sights, whatever. But she says we could go somewhere where we wouldn't have to be just friends or just roommates. We'll never be normal. We'll never be those couples on *The Newlywed Game*. And I don't know if I'd even want that. But maybe we wouldn't have to hide so much. We could find other people who understand.

We sprawled out on a picnic blanket on the riverbank under these abandoned train tracks. The area didn't get a lot of foot traffic, so it became kind of a private place for the two of us--a retreat from the Middle West, tucked away somewhere in the midst of it all. April was wet, but we couldn't resist that springtime smell. I moved a piece of her hair and kissed her like I do when we're alone. Natural. Easy. Quiet. I probably made a decision then. I didn't think it, and I didn't say it. But something shifted in that moment. The kiss itself was, I suppose, unremarkable. But the stars must have been aligned because the sound of the river and the smell of the air and the taste of her mouth all came together for me in that moment--and I knew there was no way we could say goodbye to each other just yet.

"I can't believe you called your parents. I mean. I can. I know you had to call your parents. But, oh, my god, you called your parents."

Ed and Rosemary come into view, and Maggie seems to be freaking out quite enough for the both of us. I should be scared, right? Nervous, guilty--something. But all I feel is fucking *relieved*.

My sneaking around for the protests hasn't been especially involved. My parents don't ask a lot of questions, and they've never had much reason to distrust me. They've met Maggie in passing. They know I've been spending a lot of time with her, but I'm not sure they understand in what capacity. They like her well enough, I think; she's hard not to like. But I know they're wary of her being older and living in the city--a little concerned that she may be a bad influence but not concerned enough to confront me about it.

This is the confrontation, though.

... Sort of. Always keen to avoid a public scene, my parents take care of whatever legal stuff needs to be taken care of quietly (they bail out Maggie, too--bless their hearts), and we all walk briskly to the car. Silent.

We drop Maggie off at her apartment, and my mother pretends to be not horrified at the neighborhood. It isn't until we're out of the city and on the highway back to Middletown that anyone says anything about the reason we're all here tonight.

"So, you weren't at the prom," my dad says.

"No," I reply.

"You were at a Vietnam War protest in downtown Indianapolis," my mom says.

"Yes," I reply.

It goes back and forth like this for a while, very cut and dry, as my parents get filled in on what I've been up to the past few months. They're confused, but they're taking it pretty well. But then I tell them I'm thinking about taking some time off after graduation, maybe traveling for a year or two, seeing what the world outside of Indiana has to offer me. That goes over less successfully.



“What the hell’s wrong with Indiana?” / “What about college?” The front half of the car is now filled with considerably more emotion than it was a few minutes ago.

“Your mother and I have seen the world outside of Indiana, and, let me tell you, it’s not much,” Dad spits from the front seat.

“You lived in Colorado for like eight months twenty years ago!” My parents did a short stint in Boulder after they got married, but apparently they hated it and decided Indiana was the only place they wanted to start a family and build a life together. We’re all born-and-bred Middletowners, and my dad seems personally offended even at the suggestion that I might live somewhere else.

Mom’s more worried about school, which I can better understand. I guess I’m worried about school, too. If not college, then what? Marriage? Yikes. But I tell her it’s not off the table entirely--just not right now.

We make it home in one piece. Ed and Rosemary say we’ll continue the discussion in the morning, and they’re off to bed.

I make a quick call to Maggie from the kitchen to see how she’s feeling and to fill her in on the details of the drive home. We’re both exhausted, but the worst is over, I think--at least with the parents. The subject has been breached. Now it’s just a matter of getting them comfortable with it. Or comfortable enough to let me go without excommunicating me.

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you, too,” I whisper. I hang up the phone, tiptoe upstairs, and collapse into bed.

We know we’re young. And that awareness is exactly what’s allowing us to do what we’re doing. Young love (usually) doesn’t last forever. We know it. We’ve talked about it. We are first and foremost friends, and we will support each other through anything--even if that eventually means leaving each other.

So, it’s maybe short-lived, but, god, *you know what young love feels like*. What any love feels like, I hope. We’re fucking invincible. There is a fire inside each of us, and it just feels like the dumbest god damn thing to pour water on it now. We are both ready to take the next step in our lives, and we’re excited to do it together.

My mom’s sister, Deb, has a spare room in her California apartment she’s generously offered to rent to us for cheap until we find our footing. It’s not exactly the dream: living with my girlfriend...with Aunt Deb. But it’s not Middletown, and I think that’s probably the most important part. I love it here--I really do. But it’s time to fall in love with a new place. Maybe San Francisco can be that place.

No one saw this coming: Julia Thornburg skipping town to go be a waitress in California. But I don’t think anything has ever felt so right. And that’s weird for me. I like order and planning, and, yes, this is a plan. We have a plan. But it’s a loose one. There is so much room to move around and feel out what we want to do--figure out what we can do. We can do...anything. A year ago this would have terrified me. But, hey, I guess that’s getting older.

Part 4

# Forgetting a Living

“A rebellious girl is the spirit  
of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest.”

-- Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*

# What the State of Your Skin Says About You

Anna Butler

(1968)

There are good days, and there are bad days. Today, July 12th, 1968, is a bad day, one of the ones where I sit and rot at this beautiful mahogany desk and wish that people knew what I do. Scratch that, I wish that people knew what I do, and were *okay* with knowing. My eyes travel the price list, descending from item to item like a trained monkey does the rungs of a ladder, which is generally what I feel like while doing the home's office work, as I am now. I much prefer the manual labor of preparing bodies for viewings. I feel there's more of a human element to that type of work, and I wonder to myself what it says about the state of my job satisfaction that I categorize it that way. If I can't work with live people, might as well work with dead ones.

- Handling of arrangements
- Viewing in-chapel (evening)
- Funeral in-parlor (afternoon)
- Embalming
- 2-hour visiting period
- Gratuity (priest)
- Organ soloist
- So on and so forth

I pause between each item to sneak a peek at one of our price lists, which specifies some of our offerings and their general prices. It's meant to be a reference just for clients, but I always use one for figuring costs, myself. I probably shouldn't. It's not nearly detailed enough, leaves too many costs ambiguous. I've known other funeral home directors to use this flaw in their own lists to their advantage, overcharging for services performed, and even charging for services that *others* perform, like the priest or an automated digging machine.

My husband, Paul, charges only what is due and knows those prices by heart, making me wish *he* were the one trapped in here tallying bills, instead. It's too crass a part of the funeral home business for me, too objective a thing to fit into the emotional, subjective whole that is the loss of a loved one. Regardless, I pick up the nearest list to check the cost of hearse rental, uncovering this month's edition of *Casket and Sunnyside*. Speak of the devil. Paul is always reading the damn thing, and I've never understood why. It seems to mock death, especially

its advertisements, like the one staring me in the face right now. “Want the skin to retain a velvety softness? Flextone Embalming Fluid causes a mild, flexible rigidity. Ideal for women and children!” I don’t know whether to roll my eyes or gag. While the funeral home business is, at its core, an institution for providing services, those services come with their own unique set of products, meaning advertising is a necessity. I just wish it would be done with a bit more tact. *Tact that I could provide*, I can’t stop myself from thinking.

Through the office doorway echoes the voice of Paul escorting a grieving set of parents from the vestibule to the receiving room. I embalmed their daughter just this morning, and his appointment with them is precisely why I have been subjugated to the role of secretary/accountant for the afternoon. As always, it makes me want to either scream or disappear. Either would be better than this middle-state of being seen but not appreciated. There’s not much of a place in the funeral home industry for women unless you want to be a secretary or cosmetician. At least I can still embalm...even if covertly.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. and Mrs. Schneider. I am very sorry for your loss. Can I offer you some tea?” A pause. “No, of course not. Please, this way.”

Paul has one of those charming, booming voices that would carry through a room entirely lined with sponges. He does his best to tame it when dealing with clients, would hate to seem excited and cheerful about their grief, but I can still hear him loud and clear. On the other end of the spectrum, I can never hear the clients, their hushed, woebegone tones fizzling out only inches from their mouths. It creates the delightful impression that Paul is speaking to no one, has finally lost it. The repressed undertaker cutting loose at last! I chuckle to myself and then cover my mouth. Clients who think they’re having fun poked at them are not likely to give good reviews. Besides, I remind myself, I’m not in a good mood anyway.

I glance back down to the list of services I’m trying to itemize into a contract, and can almost feel my eyes cross from boredom. The voices of Paul and the Schneiders have grown more muffled now, the door to the receiving room having been closed, and I decide to shirk my clerical duties to listen in on their negotiations. This is no new practice for me. There is a vent perfectly located in the floor against the wall the hallway shares with the back wall of the receiving room. Many days, I stand above it and pretend that I am Paul, in that room, and that Paul doesn’t exist, or more accurately, that he has his own damn job.

My grandfather established the Brookley Funeral Home in Middletown, Indiana in 1904. I’d never really quite known why; he’d had Alzheimers and not much of a personality by the time I’d gotten to know him. I couldn’t pinpoint a motivation beside the fact that he’d grown up during a time when the funeral industry was respected. The chaos of the Civil War had awoken America to its need for preservation of the dead and an organized goodbye, and I guess that realization just hadn’t worn off yet. My father had grown up in the home during WWI, and I during WWII, the quick succession of the wars making sure the realization never wore off. We both knew our profession was important. I took to it quickly, helping my father through menial tasks at first, then more involved ones as I aged. My hard work never seemed to convince him, though, and he was constantly lamenting his lack of a son, constantly seeking out a worthy male apprentice to inherit the home when he passed.

Some of my fondest memories are also some of my most damaging. as a girl, I'd spend countless hours in the embalming room with my father, handing him tools and lending a hand. One day when I was fifteen, I remember forking over a metal hook used for probing the neck incision to find the necessary veins. As Papa's fingers clamped around the instrument, I chirped out, "Can I try?" He chuckled and his eyes sparkled as they met with my hopeful gaze, quickly dulling when he felt the pressure of my grasp on the hook, not ready to let it go. He'd thought I was joking. After lightly jerking the instrument from my fingers, he proceeded to insert it into the neck incision on the elderly gentleman he has preparing, his stare intent on his work, cold with concentration. He wasn't fooling me, though. He could do this work in his sleep.

"Dad?"

"What, Charley."

"Can I try?"

"Not today, dear."

"When can I?" He found the jugular, pulled it out a bit, and secured it by sliding a file underneath.

"We'll talk about it later." I stared him down the way he was staring down the old man's neck. I was used to him not following through on his promises. After awhile it became too much for him. He broke.

"Char, listen, you're just not cut out for this kind of work."

"Why?"

He re-inserted the hook, searching for the carotid. His movements were becoming overcalculated and dramatic, as if he were trying to convince even himself that he needed to concentrate. He secured the carotid and, anticipating the next step, I handed him a scalpel, which he took without looking up.

"Dad!" He jerked around to face me.

"Women don't have the stomach for embalming, Char, it's just a fact of life!"

"But Dad, I watch you all the time and I've never been sick. I'm watching you no--"

"Charlotte Ann Brookley, go help your mother upstairs, I'm sure she needs it!"

"She's just arranging flo--"

"Go."

Papa never did find a male apprentice. He was stuck with me, and in the end he knew it too, since his fight with Influenza had lasted several weeks before his body gave out. It was just long enough to insist I marry Paul, my beau of two years, and then pass the home on to Paul before Papa died in the Summer of '56. I was in my early 20s at that time, young and impressionable. I'd put a lot of work into learning the trade and into the Brookley home, even completing an embalming course at Middletown University. I'd wanted the home to be mine, so I married him. It'd seemed a good idea at the time. Even though I resented my father, I loved Paul. He was a forward thinker when most people seemed to be stuck in the 30s. He respected me and my passion for the funeral profession, woman or not, and as I suspected, he let me run the home, *my* home...for awhile.

"I will contact Reverend Parch and see about his availability this week. Do you have anyone chosen to act as pallbearers? Friends or family, perhaps?" At this, the Schneiders begin to list unfamiliar names. This is a part of the process

that I always find intriguing. I take in each name and attempt to picture each person, imagine their life, feel their grief, commune with their spirit. I've spent much time observing the grieving process, and I've heard from several funeral directors that the continued exposure desensitizes them. In myself, it only increases my empathy.

After the Schneiders list several family members and close friends, Paul continues, "Alright, that'll do just fine. Now, I'm going to need to ask you for some information so that I can compose the vital statistics form."

I cringe, and not only because this term insinuates that the Schneiders' daughter still *has* vitals. While my relationship with my father was far from perfect, I'd always admired the way he conducted his business. Papa not only cared about being generally liked, about wooing clients. He also cared about the *lives* of those clients. Never would he have called it a "vital statistics form," but always just what it was, a death certificate. Along with the commercialization of funeral homes has come certain tactics in order to do better business, and this is one of them. More and more directors like to trick clients into rejecting the reality of their loved one's death simply by avoiding the word "death" in any context. While it might make clients more comfortable in the short term, Papa seemed to think it would make recovery much more difficult in the long term, and I tend to agree with him.

After the Schneiders convey age, address, etc., Paul states, "Ms. Schneider is currently resting in the slumber room, but will of course require a casket in which to rest during and after the ceremony." I shake my head in disgust. "I think it's time we made a visit to the casket room to discuss your amount of investment in the service."

Really!? I'd never heard Paul go quite this far before. "Amount of investment in the service" is used to trick clients into believing the more they pay for a casket, the more they care about the deceased. I'd always found it an appalling concept, and I still do now. It dawns on me: Not only is the Brookley home no longer *my* business, but it's now also ceasing to be *my family's* business. *You should've put that will in my name, Papa.*

While wrestling with frustration, my gaze happens to fall upon my watch. It's 4:23pm, and a sense of foreboding invades my mind, beating the issue of Paul's new vocabulary to a pulp and kicking it out my left ear. It's time I left for my consciousness-raising group meeting, a practice that has grown more and more unpleasant for me over the past month. I struggle not to think about Kathie Wilson as I snatch my purse and creep toward the front doors. Despite my stealth, the door to the receiving room cracks open, and Paul emerges, shutting the door behind him. Through the crack, for just one moment, I can see the bewildered faces of the Schneiders peering out at me.

"Where are you going?" Paul asks, slight accusation in his voice.

"Sarah's," I reply. "For my consciousness-raising group." He rolls his eyes.

"Really? You're still enjoying those!?"

"I don't think enjoyment is the ultimate goal, Paul."

"Yeah yeah, women's liberation, I know. But aren't you starting to feel like those women are a little, I don't know, extreme?"

I raise an eyebrow and stare, stonefaced, at him for a moment. His neck is beginning to blush red. He's always been fair-skinned, and though he's good at

hiding emotion, the amount of redness in his skin always gives away any anger or frustration.

“No. I don’t,” I say.

“Look, I’m sorry, Char. It all just made a lot more sense to me when this stuff focused on equal pay, job opportunities, you know. But this “all men” stuff is just ridiculous. I can’t believe you’re falling for it. Do you *really* think I discriminate against you?” And there it is.

He’s been confusing me for a long time now. He used to be so on fire for women’s rights, for *my* rights. He really wanted the home to be in my name, now I’m not so sure. After dozens of verbal battles with male clients and refusals by them to pay me more than chicken feed for my funeral directing services, Paul took the reigns.

He now seems to be enjoying being the friendly, salt-of-the-earth neighborhood funeral director more every day, and I feel he’s using gender discrimination as a mask. I picture him saying, through the cracks of a smile, *I’m so sorry you can’t run the home without being paid bottom dollar, Char. Here, let me help. I’ll carry this burden for you. Let me run the home.* It only makes sense that he would feel uneasy about consciousness-raising groups, as they encourage women to realize how they’re being discriminated against not only in the working world, but in their homes and personal relationships. In society. In everything. Of course I don’t feel comfortable saying any of this. I’m starting to feel these CR groups are onto something.

“The Schneiders are waiting on you. Don’t be rude.” I blurt, closing my throat to what I really want to say. His eyes raise to the ceiling and hold there for a moment, as if he’s trying to decide what to do about something. As if he *needs* to do something about something.

“Okay, have fun.” He seeths, meeting my eyes for only a second before squeezing himself back into the receiving room.

I can’t seem to tear my eyes away from the base of Kathie’s pinky finger. Ten other neighborhood women and myself sit in a disfigured circle, matching the outline of Sarah Carson’s living room made by various types of seats. Laura Hamilton, Karen Matthews, Patricia Reynolds, Kathie Wilson, etc., and there’s been mention that Susan Hastings might begin bringing a woman named Janis. Sarah leads the local consciousness-raising group, a place where we are supposed to be free of the invisible limits placed on us by men, but I am certainly not, and for a certain reason. Kathie’s mouth is moving, talking about her husband, Oliver Wilson. He is that reason. I blame Oliver for the bruise at the base of Kathie’s pinky, the soft flesh at that place on her hand being exactly the location a bruise would be on someone deflecting a blow from an attacker. She hides it in her lap, but I’ve been watching her every week, and always a new bruise or gash appears: neck, forearm, wrist, once a forehead, cleverly disguised by a fanciful headband. I am imprisoned by the way her hand hides between her legs, the way her eyes droop, the way she speaks just like the Schneiders do. The other women don’t seem to notice it, but Kathie and I have come to know each other better over the few months preceding. She shows much interest in my work, something I’ve felt safe divulging in the confidence of these other struggling women. She’s especially curious about the process of embalming, and we will frequently spend some

time talking after meetings.

"He's constantly pressuring me to have children, but I just don't want them. At least not right now. I feel guilty. I feel like I should want them, I mean, it's not unusual for a man to expect to have children with his wife of five years, is it?" A spattering of voices reach out with phrases like "Noooo, but that's not your duty!" and "Yes, he shouldn't expect anything of the sort!" I remind myself how grateful I am that Paul agrees with me on not wanting kids. When birth control was approved for married couples a few years ago, we jumped at the chance to get me on it. I'm sure Oliver Wilson is not as accommodating.

Kathie looks around and smiles weakly. "Thank you, ladies." She's hesitant. "I think it's just a bit more involved than that. Oliver's had a congenital heart condition for quite some time now. I'm pretty sure he's worried it might remove him from the world before he's had a chance at kids."

At this, Kathie looks down to her lap and realizes she's let her hand slip out onto her thigh. She jams it back between her legs where it can't be seen. The other women in the room again fail to notice, as wrapped up as they are in seeking out Kathie's eyes, trying to seek the pain in them so that they can better empathize. It's ironic, really, how they're missing the real issue for that reason.

At that point, Sarah looks up at the clock and declares the meeting over. Kathie was the last turn to speak, anyway. I walk to the back of the unofficial line waiting to give her their condolences, making sure I'm at the back of it. When everyone else has dispersed, I place a hand on her shoulder and look her in the eyes. "That sounds really difficult." She gives that same repulsively weak smile, and I struggle not to gag. It's not her fault she's repulsive. We walk to the door.

"Thanks, Charlotte. Enough about me though, I'm not used to all this attention." She gives a nervous laugh. "How's your work been this week? I heard about poor Janet Schneider."

Funeral business seems like a strange thing to use as escapism, but I decided to indulge her. Lord knows I have no one else to talk to about it, and she's clearly had a rough week. We take off down the street together.

"Yes, the poor dear. I heard the accident was brutal. I had to do some reconstructive work on her face and shoulder. Was able to get right around to it, though. Coroner signed off on her body instantly."

"Oh, no autopsy?" Kathie seemed surprised and, some other emotion... relief? Regardless of the oddity of this, I had to stifle a giggle and a snort. It's a common misconception that every body undergoes an autopsy before it's handed over to the funeral home.

"No ma'am! Only deaths where the cause is uncertain require autopsies. Janet's was pretty straightforward."

"Oh! Interesting!"

"Mhmm, accidents, chronic illnesses, visible injuries, etcetera. These things all make cause of death pretty clear." Kathie nods and smiles again. *Enough with the smiling. It's not convincing anyone, I think.*

I return home to find Paul perched at the kitchen table, reading the very same *Casket and Sunnyside* magazine I encountered earlier. I can't help but roll my eyes a little. I do my best to not let him see.

"Char! You have to read this article about Kennedy." He's oblivious.



“Kennedy’s dead, Paul. And it’s not funny.” I’m still sore at him.

“I’m a funeral director, Char, you think I don’t know that? It’s about his funeral arrangements.”

I took the magazine with mild interest, I’ll admit. Kennedy had visited MU just a couple months before his assassination and we’d attended his talk. April 4th, it’d been the very same day MLK was killed. I skimmed the article.

“Paul, everything in this article is devoid of sincerity and emotion. ‘a lonely night vigil with the body?’ Is that all Ethel’s grief is good for? One lousy phrase, and the rest just glorifies the funeral directors that handled her husband? And did this magazine even feature an article about the arrangements for King?”

“Heck if I know, and just what do you expect, Char? It’s a *trade* magazine, about the funeral home *trade*.” His ears are turning red.

“Well there ought to be more to *the trade*, if you ask me.”

Paul sighs dramatically. “Is this about the words I use when talking to clients again?”

“Maybe... I just feel like...”

Paul, in his anger, cuts me off. His cheeks now resemble cherries. “That’s just your problem, Char. *Feeling*. You *feel* everything. Listen, this is my business, and I’ll run it the way I see fit.”

I silently watch him storm from the room, but what I want to do is scream after him that he wouldn’t even be in this business if it weren’t for me.

“I actually had one just a couple months ago,” Kathie chokes. Today’s CR group topic is abortion. A plethora of jaws fall open. Abortion isn’t legal, and while we’ve all heard stories of women seeking them out, I suspect Kathie is the first many of these women have personally known to have one. She begins to cry. Several women move to comfort her, doing their best not to seem appalled. But they are. So am I, but that’s not why. I think to myself that the motivation behind Kathie’s bruises is more serious than I’d thought.

I don’t really know how I fell asleep, thinking about Kathie at home with that monster. In fact, I’d started to feel as though my own husband was sprouting fangs, growing fur. I still drifted off next to him.

I awake to the sound of the telephone ringing and glance at the clock through a haze. 3:17am. Paul shifts beside me and picks up the call.

“Brookley Funeral Home,” he sugars. Most late night calls are about bodies that are being committed to our care, need immediate embalming or else refrigeration.

“Of course, I’ll be right over to pick up the deceased.” A pause. “Yes, thank you.”

“Who’s the unlucky soul tonight?” I shift to my back and stare at the ceiling, preparing myself to sympathize with the family, gauge the damage done to the people of Middletown.

“Oliver Wilson.” Paul gets out of bed and begins to dress himself as if the most wonderful thing in the world has not just happened. “Passed by way of a heart attack.” My somber expectations melt into guilty, elated revenge.

Paul and I drive back to the home from the Wilsons’. I’d sat and watched as he asked her a few questions, had difficulty getting a read on her. She’s surely

having complicated emotions. I help Paul bring in the body and store it in the refrigeration unit, then sink back into bed in a fog of relief. Strangely, this is the part of the night that I can't sleep. The monster has been caged, and this does not relax me, it energizes me. After attempting to sleep for an hour or so, I decide to execute the embalming of Oliver Wilson. It's best to embalm as soon as possible anyway, reduces the chance of complications.

As I wheel him out of the refrigerator and onto the prep room table, my excitement turns to anger. I've watched the slow decay of his beautiful wife at his hand, and his bruise-free skin makes me seethe. My anger makes me hasty, and his right arm catches on the embalming table as I transfer him onto it. When a bruise begins to raise there, I smile. It *was* an accident, I *swear*. Blood has begun rushing to the lower areas of Oliver's body during the past couple of hours, making the back of his head, neck, and back a purplish tone. The higher areas, however, are a rosier shade than is normal for a corpse at this stage. Not to mention every heart attack victim I've embalmed has been much more purple in the face than this one. I shrug it off; this wouldn't be the first odd thing I've encountered in the embalming room.

I trudge through the first of the steps an embalmer must follow, packing the orifices, shaving the face, setting the eyes, shaping the mouth, until I reach the step I have been waiting for. It's time to remove all that nasty bacterial fluid from Mr. Wilson's chest cavity. Normally, I cringe to arrive at this part of the process, but in just this one case, it will be the joy of the embalming. I retrieve my trocar, a two-foot-long metal tube, and sharpen its point on my whetstone after connecting a stretch of tubing to the other end. Then, locating a soft fleshy spot on Oliver's stomach near his belly button, I place the sharp end of the trocar and shove it down and forward with a jerk that any onlooker would doubt to be pre-meditated. His skin shows more resistance than I'm used to. It's thick. Still, this action feels great. With my trocar inside Oliver, I re-aim, this time for his heart, and thrust again. I can't help but imagine that this particular organ is full of much more bacteria than the average person's, that it's rotting from the inside out, that my trocar will suction vile fluid from it for hours without pause. When the drain ceases after a minute, it brings my head out of the clouds. I pull backward and reposition my aim again, thrusting into his lungs. His body lurches on the table with the force, and I wonder to myself what I often wonder while performing embalmings: whether the spirits of the dead are at all able to feel what becomes of their bodies. It is a thought I normally quickly push from my mind whenever it occurs, but tonight, in the wee hours of the morning, I revel in it. I rejoice in the chance I've been given to wreak revenge, and every puncture I make brings me satisfaction. I'm avenging dear Kathie.

When it comes time to inject the embalming fluid, I slit a small gash in Oliver's neck, incredibly close, in location, to the bruise on Kathie's, I think to myself with a smirk, and I tug through it the carotid artery and jugular vein with a bit more gusto than I probably should. With every action, I see Kathie's face, hear the weakness in her voice, and it urges me on to the next step. By this point, I feel I am the voice for the voiceless, the arms for the impaired, I feel I am Kathie's savior.

As I insert the drainage tube and cannula into their respective artery and vein, I step back to admire my work, to watch the blood slosh down the drain to

the sewage below. His blood is cherry red. An unusually bright shade of crimson. This is a shade of red worthy of Paul's enraged face...and Paul is *alive*. Flabbergasted, I rush to grab a bucket and place the drainage tube inside. Blood gathers in it for a minute, before I remove it from the flow. Sure enough, en masse, it appears as liquefied ketchup or strawberry jam, so bright is its color. Could it be? I'm almost in disbelief. Come to think of it, every type of death brings with it a particular smell that I'm used to whiffing, and Oliver doesn't smell of heart attack at all.

I recall a story, relayed to me by Paul, of an embalmer who prepared the remains of a homicide victim who had died by poisoning. The blood, he'd been told by the coroner, would be red as a rose, the skin would be thicker, and if he was lucky, he might be able to sense the smell of bitter almonds as he drained the man's veins, another effect of arsenic on the blood. I grip the rim of the bucket hard with both fists and gawk at the sloshing mass it holds, while my own blood drains from my knuckles. I raise the bucket to my chin, and breathe in. A smile slowly grows on my lips, and I feel the fool. Kathie needs no savior. I think of Paul, asleep in the other room, and I wonder, do I?

# Her Silly Habit

Cassie Lynch

(1968)

Mommy, why do I have to go to school?" Tommy tottered along, holding Janis' hand tightly.

"Because darling, everyone has to go to school to get basic education. Even mommy and daddy had to go." Janis breathed. Janis' blouse was sticking uncomfortably to her chest and her hair was falling out of its bun. She hoped that Tommy would adjust to kindergarten well, even though he hadn't spent much time with other children.

They reached the school and the buzz of activity crowded the air around them. They waded through the sea of children and parents to the front door, where once they entered Janis led the way to the office. Inside the office she asked for the room and before she knew it she was giving him a final kiss on the cheek.

"Tommy, I expect you to behave. I'll come to pick you up later." Janis straightened Tommy's shirt. Tommy nodded obediently before turning away to join a group of children surrounding building blocks. Janis stood from her crouch to nod at the teacher before turning to leave. Once she was outside she exhaled into the thick air and started on her walk back to her house, three blocks away.

"Time already for Tommy to start school?" Mrs. Susan Hastings, Janis' neighbor said while pulling a weed from her rose garden.

"It seems like yesterday when I brought him home from the hospital," Janis said, wiping sweat from her forehead. Stopping at the fence which separates the Everdeen's and the Hastings' yards, she watched Susan pull another weed from her garden. "I'm not sure what to do with myself now."

"You know," Susan looked up from her work, "I've begun reading after my boys started schooling. It's quite a pleasant way to pass time, aside from gardening."

Janis didn't say anything for a while. She looked around her neighborhood. She saw Charlotte leave the Brookley Funeral Home. She remembered when Susan took her to a women's group and Charlotte was there, looking at a woman named Kathie a lot.

"I don't like gardening. I suppose reading could be a nice change, though

I never have been much of a reader. I guess none of the stories interested me before.” Janis sighed.

“Well, then I’ve got just the book for you. Wait here while I go get it.” Susan stood and brushed off her gardening pants before disappearing into the house. She returned with a book about the thickness of a can of tuna, its red cover worn. “Try this book out, it doesn’t look like much, but I couldn’t put it down the first time I read it. I bet you’ll be through it in no time!”

“Thanks Susan, I’ll give it a try,” Janis coyly took the book. The two women nodded to one another and soon Janis was inside her dark, slightly cooler home. She gazed at the cover of the veteran novel and touched its binding.

“*The Feminine Mystique*” Janis whispered. She opened the cover and carefully looked at each page leading to the first chapter. Normally Janis wouldn’t bother actually reading this book, but Susan was persistent. Janis remembered when Susan helped her through her pregnancy, years ago, and so she decided that Susan would only offer a book that would be worth reading. So Janis found herself a spot on her sofa and began reading. She finished with the first section in what felt like no time, though it was clear that a few hours had passed. Seeing the break between sections forced her out of her reading daze and she glanced around her dim living room. She carefully placed the book on the coffee table and stood up to stretch. Her stomach grumbled so she wandered into the kitchen.

While preparing her sandwich, she thought of the book. The beginning so involved her that she lost track of time. Soon she would have to pick up Tommy from school. The thought of this panged her heart for several reasons. Janis hoped that Tommy was doing well in his new class; she visualized him crying for her and had to shake the thought away. She knew that he could do well, since he had always been enthusiastic for starting new things. Another source of the pang to her heart was the thought that Janis did not want to stop reading. She did not want to eat or pick up Tommy either. Again the thought of Tommy alone and crying clouded her thoughts. Janis resolved to wait to read any more of the book until she and Tommy were at home and a few daily chores were done.

After finishing her sandwich Janis started out the door to pick up Tommy. She wanted to get there early, because she felt guilty for not wanting to go at all. The sun was higher in the sky than before and Janis walked slowly. Susan was no longer in her rose garden, and Janis presumed that she was inside doing her chores, or maybe she was reading too? Janis shrugged to herself and her mind wandered to her story. Before she realized it, she was standing in front of Middletown Elementary. She worked her way into the parent pick up area inside and waited.

“Mommy!” Tommy exclaimed as he trotted out of the classroom. Janis could not help but smile at his enthusiasm for her. She bent down to hug him.

“How was it, Tommy?”

“Fun! We played lots of games, mama,” Tommy smiled brightly. Janis felt relieved that Tommy enjoyed his first day at school. She knew that she was right not to worry. The pair held hands as they walked out into the heat to their home. Once there, Janis made Tommy a snack and asked him more about what they did in class. She began finishing the day’s chores and forgot about her book for the time being.

A few weeks later, Janis was washing dishes and listening to Nancy Sinatra's *These Boots Are Made for Walkin'* on the radio. The radio voice mentioned a future interview with a psychologist about "The Women's Problem that has No Name" and Janis froze. She suddenly remembered her book, which she had placed on the coffee table and left for the last few weeks. Details from the first half flashed through her head and a hunger filled her heart. Quickly she finished the last dish from the sink. She scurried into the living room and spotted the source for her hunger.

The worn red cover was sitting under a few newspapers that her husband, Bill, had placed on top of it. She remembered their short discussion about it, how Janis passed the novel off as a silly past time that she certainly did not care about seriously. And she remembered that Bill had nodded and said that it was good that she was doing something with her free time, now that Tommy was in school. She remembers his placid smile.

But how could she let herself forget about it? Janis threw off the newspapers and plopped down on her sofa, gripping the novel like a lost friend. She hurled herself into the remaining chapters. She finished it quickly, but she wanted more books like this. She wanted books where women weren't just housewives; where instead they created things and questioned the world. What had she done to her library card?

After rummaging through her box of old paperwork, from high school, Janis found her library card. She had decided that she had to visit the library. Bill had the car Windsor so Janis had to walk, which suited her well enough. This Saturday was pleasant, and Tommy's grandmother was visiting for the week.

"I'm off to the library and the store afterwards. Is there anything you need?" Janis spoke softly to Nana Everdeen.

"Oh, no I don't need a thing." Nana Everdeen smiled and added, "However, I do believe the Marshers' Grocery sells those divine chocolates. You know the ones I like, don't you?"

"I'll look to see if they have them, then." Janis smiled and hugged Tommy. "I won't be long." She practically leapt out of the house into the fresh air. The birds were chirping, but Janis didn't notice. She walked hastily to the large, bricked building which had a plaque reading "Middletown Library". She was giddy when she opened the door.

She stepped through the old building, and she could feel the old carpet through her kitten heels. She looked through a few shelves for an hour and found herself holding several books. Knowing that Tommy and Nana Everdeen were waiting for her, she knew that she had to be leaving. Janis found the library desk and checked out her small collection. All the librarians were women, dressed in nice and neat dresses and their hair up. There was a man, who must be the owner, sitting at a desk smoking a cigar. She checked out the books that she had grabbed with an older lady dressed in gray. With the books in the bag she brought, she was soon on her way to the grocery store.

Janis remembered the cover of one of the books she grabbed; it was purple with gold lettering. She could not remember the title, however, so she decided that she wanted to take another peek at it. While still walking down the street, she searched through her bag and found the book. She got a glimpse of the gold

lettering on the cover before she heard the horn behind her.

At the Fall Memorial Hospital, the smell was always too clean. Janis remembered visiting years ago. She remembered how strange it was that the nurses were all women, but the doctors were men.

“Mama, mama,”

Janis opened her eyes to the whiteness, which seemed to invade her senses. She felt a tug on her arm, and she looked at that direction to find Tommy’s large brown eyes searching for her’s. She met them and tried to smile.

“She’s awake, Daddy!” Tommy squealed. Bill threw down the newspaper and hopped out of his chair.

“Janis, finally,” Bill grabbed her hand and squeezed. “I’m so glad to see that you’re awake!”

“What’s going on?” Janis heard her voice echo in the room.

“You were hit by a car on the way to the store.” Bill grimaced, but then looked relieved when he said, “You were lucky. We were lucky. We could have lost you.” He squeezed her hand again.

Janis looked down at the bed sheets. Her left leg was suspended in a sling; it was wrapped up to the thigh in a cast. She breathed a deep sigh, but felt pain in her ribs.

“Now, it’s only a broken leg and some bruises, but it could have been more serious,” Bill looked at her leg. “They found you with a bunch of books. What were you doing? Did you go to the library? You know there’s no sidewalk from there to Marcher’s.”

“Well,” Janis began.

“This isn’t about your silly habit, is it?” Bill cut in.

“Well,” Janis repeated, “I read the book that Susan loaned me, and I wanted to read more. I should have been careful.” Janis felt guilty for her carelessness. “Do you have them still? The books?”

“Yes,” Bill sighed and motioned to the lumpy bag sitting on the table. “I have to go to work now, dear. Tommy and I will visit tomorrow.” He started to fold the newspaper that was on the floor.

“Will you hand me the books? I’ll have nothing else to do otherwise,” Janis looked longfully at her collection. Bill sighed, but handed her the books. They hugged and said their goodbyes.

When the room was silent again, Janis looked around her at her stark hospital room. She sighed heavily and looked for her purple book. “*The Monster Put Together*,” was its title, written in gold cursive. Janis opened the cover and began reading. Soon she was thinking of science, as she read about a woman working on a great experiment; to create a living man from the dead.

Janis was interrupted by a knock at her door; she looked up and noticed the darkness outside. The door opened to a nurse, who was coming in for a routine checkup.

“Good evening ma’am, what are you reading?” The nurse asked, while she looked at Janis.

“*The Monster Put Together*, have you read it?” Janis inquired.

“Oh, that book. Yes, I had to do a research paper on the author in my literature course, back in college.” The nurse thought for a moment, “You know the

name Fredrick Davis is actually a penname. The real author was a woman named Shirley Wright.”

“I didn’t know that,” Janis answered.

“Yes, she has only written that one book,” the nurse continued. “But it has become quite popular.” The nurse finished her tests, gave Janis some medication, and left.

Janis’ head was buzzing, she wasn’t sure if it was the medication or excitement. She thought of a class which would let her read and research her favorite books. The idea sounded marvelous and Janis daydreamed about it until she fell asleep.

When she woke up it was early in the morning. Janis recalled her dream, where she was the scientist creating a man out of old parts. The feeling that she felt, while creating something, felt inspiring. She thought again of literature classes.

“Well,” Janis whispered to herself, “we do have a college close to us. In walking distance, actually.” With that, she resolved to talk to Bill about it. Until then, she would read her purple book.

Janis didn’t bring up the idea of attending MU until she was well out of the hospital. She knew that if she brought up going to the university that Bill would immediately say no, at least while her leg was still in a cast. But today was the day Janis was going to insist that she go to Middletown University. Janis made sure all the chores were done and that supper was cooked; Bills favorite, pork chops and mashed potatoes.

Janis was reading Time Magazine when Bill walked in the door.

“Daddy!” Tommy ran to give Bill a hug. Watching them, Janis hurriedly put down the magazine and walked up to Bill to give him a kiss.

“How was your day, darling?” Janis took Bill’s hat and set it on the coat rack.

“It was alright, but some of the assembly line boys were giving me some trouble,” Bill said while walking over to the recliner and grabbing the newspaper.

“Well, that’s too bad,” Janis said walking over to the kitchen. “Why don’t I make you a Gin Rickey to go with dinner?”

“That sounds swell” Bill smiled, “What are we having?”

“Pork chops” Janis said as she started on Bill’s drink. Once finished she ordered Tommy to wash his hands while she was setting the table. Soon there was only the sound of knives cutting and mouths smacking. Tommy finished his food quickly and was excused from the table. Janis brought Bill a second Gin Rickey.

“So, darling, what have you been doing with yourself, now that your leg has almost healed?” Bill smiled at her, his cheeks flushed.

“Oh not much, just cleaning and reading Time.” Janis played with the tablecloth. “I’ve been meaning to ask you...”

“Ask me what, dear?” Bill took a large sip of the Gin Mickey.

“Well, I’ve been feeling so lonely with you and Tommy gone away all day and I was thinking...” she paused to take a big breath, “I was thinking about attending Middletown University.” Bill looked at her surprised at first.

“You want to go to MU? What for?”

“To take a few classes. Darling I just feel like I’m wasting away here and I really need to do something with myself.” Janis felt exasperated.

“Housework and motherhood aren’t enough for you?” Bill was incredulous.



“No, they’re not. You know after reading...” Janis started.

“Of course, after reading. You know reading is what got you that broken leg!” Bill set down his glass hard.

“Bill!” Janis was fighting tears. “You know that’s not true, it was my fault.”

“Okay, fine. But how would you get there?” Bill tapped the table.

“There are sidewalks the whole way. It’s only a few blocks that way” Janis pointed behind her.

“And what about money? How are we going to pay for this?” Bill sat back in his chair.

“Well,” Janis thought about it for a moment. “Well, didn’t you get that raise just last week?”

“Why yes, dear, but we were going to save for another car,” Bill squinted his eyes.

“The Windsor isn’t that old, it still has plenty of years left on it.” Janis looked at Bill long and hard. “Bill, this means a lot to me. Can’t we try it out for a little while?” Bill didn’t say anything for a long time. Janis was sure that he was going to say that she couldn’t go to MU, which wouldn’t be surprising because of how little women were even accepted into the University for any Reasons other than nursing or homemaking.

After a sigh Bill nodded. “Okay, fine we can try it out. Why don’t you make us both a drink to celebrate,” Bill handed her his glass. Janis jumped from the table and kissed Bill hard on the lips. She felt like she was about to soar from the house through the trees and to outer space. She made them both drinks and she and Bill spent the rest of the night talking about the details of Janis’ new adventure.

# Tierra del Blanco

Christina Dionesotes

(1969)

My drive into Middletown was less than exciting. I nodded off as Uncle Tito's radio buzzed in and out. At first, it blasted with loud Mexican lyrics, about *los labios dulces* with bellowing trumpets in the background. Then it would cut out, slowly, static overtaking the command "bésame mucho." Once my little piece of home was gone, and we were forced to listen to caballeros singin' 'bout girls in sundresses and their love of farms, I tried to fall asleep. I couldn't, thinking about what I was leaving behind. A mamá, who said,

"Go, mi cerebrita, go to college."

When all the other Mexican moms called their baby girls "mi corazón, mi alma" I was always "cerebrita," the brain of the family. I am not my mother's heart or soul, but her brain. I have no heart or soul, but a brain.

As we drive into Middletown, I realize I am in a different town, a different state, probably a different country. We exit off the highway and drive past a frenzied factory, people coming and going, colored dots speckling the damn near ugliest building I've ever seen. Maybe Uncle Tito can find a job there.

"Don't leave me," I plead. "Work at this factory and start a life here in Middletown and bring the whole family."

"Te amo, pero no me puedes pagar suficiente para vivir aquí"

We drive past uglier things as we get closer, a cemetery, a run down trailer park, overflowing with white kids in ratty clothes. By me, we wear the ratty clothes and the white kids are the ones with the shiny white shoes. Look at that. We cross the White River, and me di cuenta que estoy en la Tierra de Blanco. We pass a funeral home, Brookleys, where the people of Middletown must prepare those who they bury. Us? We are prepared to be buried each time we leave the house, each time we enter la escuela. We are born in preparation for a burial.

I knew from the moment I stepped out of Uncle Tito's car that I wasn't gonna fit in. My brothers and I call his car La Mierda because it's old and beat up but not in front of Uncle Tito. He would give us golpes until the sun set and rose again because he's so proud to have a car. He owns a mercado where he makes his money and he packed a bunch of fresh aguacates and arroz and the good frijoles.

"There ain't any good supermercados donde vas, mija."

And he was right. From the second I stepped out of the car I knew I wouldn't fit in. Woodworth Hall is supposed to be my new home? What a gringo-ass name. My friends warned me of this when I decided to go to a school in the middle of Indiana and leave Pilsen. They said I'm gonna be livin in a Gringo world and I told them we already do. Mira cuantos mexicanos tienen éxito, pocos. Casi ningunos. But I did 'cause I want to be a teacher and go back and help those little niñitos who only have shitty teachers who don't care if they drop out or not. And so here I am at this Middletown University to be some great big deal.

This whole teacher thing started at my high school last year when we fuckin' walked out of school. Refused to go. We formed our own committee and everythin', it was real legit. We had this big long paper saying we needed to be heard, no se puede callarnos. Why the fuck would we want to go to a school and listen to a bunch of old white dudes talk about their history and their books? We got history, we got books. They're in English and español and guess what? They make the US look like real fuckin' pendejos to our people. Because they were and they are and they will probably continue to be unless I do something. So what do I do to fight it? I gotta blend in and become a part of it, at least for a little, at this Gringo-ass school with these Gringo-ass kids who come from hillbilly towns that they'll return to.

I knew from the moment I stepped out of Uncle Tito's car that I wasn't gonna fit in. There was all these smilin' faces, trying to help me move into my new home, this giant brick Woodworth. I step out onto the curb wearing my nicest shoes, red and white flat tennis shoes, with white laces. They're my nicest ones cause the laces aren't even dirty yet, still a sparkly white like they're fresh off the rack. I'm trying real hard to make my best impression. But every chick unloading her stuff, with her perfectly polished family se visten como vienen de misa. Holy shit. I have to spend the whole day carrying bags and boxes up and down stairs, cleaning and unpacking. Why the hell would I try to look all fancy? But here are these girls with their curled and cropped hair and their vestidos y familia y todo. And these are supposed to be my friends? I think of my girls from back home who are becoming moms and working in stores and serving food and it seems like they have a purpose. And I can already tell my purpose is gonna be that morena girl, llena de la sangre mexicana.

I walk to the trunk of Uncle Tito's car and open it, pulling out two stacked boxes and a bag with a long strap.

Okay, let's go be a college student.

"Esperate, mija. Te ayudo, déjame unas cajas"

As if his shitty ass car didn't attract enough attention, passing people hear Spanish and are immediately offended and nervous and looking at me for a long time.

"Pendejos, no somos animales!"

I shout this and nobody knows what the hell I'm sayin. I think this could end up being fun for me. Back at Harrison High, even the Gringos learned the basic swear words, we could never get away with that. Here, I could call a girl a puta and tell her it means pretty. Fuckin' puta would probably think since they both start with "p" that it makes sense. Sheltered-ass girls. Carrying boxes, I come up to a table and recite my name. The blonde boy sitting at the table confused when I say,

“Rosa Zamora Jimenez”.

“Uhh..so what’s your last name?”

“Seriously? Zamora Jimenez.”

“Shit. What’s that start with?”

“Z-a-m-o-r-a J-i-m-e-n-e-z”

I spell it all out so he knows he’s the idiot in this situation. I will come to realize that it’s a defense tactic I use a lot.

“Here you are,” he says after searching a stack of papers for at least 3 minutes.

“You’re in room 319, rooming with Virginia Beth Johanson, it seems like she hasn’t moved in yet. Here’s your key, you’re gonna take the stairs down this hall and to the left, and we’ll come check on ya in a little bit and see how you’re doing.”

I am trying to hard not to crack a smile but is there any more of a Gringa name than Virginia Beth Johanson? I snatch the key out his hand, give a head nod and a “nos vamos” to Uncle Tito, and we trek up the two flights of stairs.

“I really hope we can be friends. Ya know? Like everyone on this hall. We can go to dances and walk to class together--ooh we’ll have to compare schedules so we can meet up for lunches. God I’d be embarrassed to eat alone in the dining halls alone, ya know?”

Virginia Beth Johanson is in fact, a Gringa name because Virginia Beth Johanson, formally known as Ginny B, is Gringa as hell. She is tall and as blonde as they come; they just don’t make them like that in Mexico and gracias a dios because her face is horseish and her hair is thin and she won’t stop talking.

“Ugh it’s like we’re going to get to know each other so well, ya know? Living together all the time. We should say 5 fun facts about us or something, to really get started on a good foot, okay? Okay here’s mine: 1. I am definitely a morning person, 2. I’m so terrified of walking into the wrong classroom on Monday, 3. I have two older sisters who are already married and I just can’t wait to be an auntie, 4. I only live an hour from here so my momma will come visit a lot and 5. I already picked out what I’m gonna wear for the first day of classes--see?”

I look up from my desk and Ginny B is staring at me, smiling so wide se duelen los cachetes and she is holding up a colorful dress with vertical stripes that I would never wear even if it was the last article of clothing on Earth.

“Nice, very nice. Okay. Do I have to do the facts?”

That gringa is staring at me nodding with wide eyes like those ugly’ bobblehead toys.

“I am Rosa, 1. I am from Chicago so my momma no viene porque tiene trabajo gringita, 2. I want to be a teacher, 3. I’m lookin’ for some good parties this weekend, 4. Don’t touch my stuff and 5. Don’t wake me up in the morning”

Through all of that, the puta hears teacher and perks up. I then listen to twenty minutes of her big plan to be a teacher until she gets married, then to be a momma just like her momma, who is the best momma. She wants to move back to the Gringo town she’s from, some Crawfords something and have 4 or 5 babies. I’m just tryin’ to understand why she’s even here.

I try to ask her some questions, seem real interested since I gotta live with her. I ask if she's been to Chicago and she said she ain't, she's not a city girl. Then she tried to ask me a question,

"Where were you actually born? Mexico? I just figure cause I hear there's a lot of Mexicans in cities but we don't got any. You're my first Mexican friend, isn't that cool? I wanna learn everything about all y'all."

*Madre Virgen, disculpeme si decida matar esta Gringa. Por favor reza por mi alma, y sepa que no tenía otra opción.*

I just try to keep organizing my food, my back to her and I tell her that yep, that's me. But no I didn't come from Mexico and I ain't ever been there so there's a huge fuckin' difference. I will forever be the Mexican girl to her and all the other Gringas. I am slamming down the packages of frijoles secos my mama has packed me, rattling the bag, so this chick can tell I'm not in the mood to discuss the fact that yes, I'm Mexican.

"So you can totally speak another language right? I heard you talking to that man who moved you in. Was that your dad? Seriously so cool it's like you have words in two different languages to choose from when you want to talk."

Gringa doesn't know when to callarse so I think I gotta teach her.

"Ginny B that ain't my dad and I don't wanna fuckin' talk about it, okay? Please just let me unpack without hearing your goddamn mouth runnin'."

"I'm sorry," She is twirling her stringy hair, obviously nervous, "I sure didn't mean to offend you, sensitive topic, I get it."

I just keep arranging my food in a small corner by my bed, my little taste of home. My frijoles and aguacates del mercado, one can of Coca-cola as a parting gift from Uncle Tito, arroz, small bottles of jugo, and a couple cans of piñ--

"You know we can't cook right? I'm just sayin' you got all that food there but we can't really cook. We have our dining halls. That's okay. Some girls from down the hall and I were gonna walk to the store if you wanna come?"

And so I end up at some supermercado called Marshers with Ginny B, Martha, Sharon and Janet. They all live on my floor of Woodworth and each of them told me they've "never met a real Mexican before" like it's an honor for them and I should be honored that I'm the first? These gringas are fuckin weird. I am scared to spend a lot of money and although this is a Gringa town I clutch my bolso tight.

"Why are you doing that?"

"I don't want to get robbed" This seems obvious to me, but apparently nobody else, as the group of Gringas laugh.

"That is so cute that you're from this big city and you think everyone will attack you. Ugh it's so paranoid but really cute. Seriously. Nobody's gonna rob you here!"

I roll my eyes as I walk up and down of each aisle, studying packages very carefully. Cause my Uncle Tito has a supermercado I never really go into other stores. I am seeing for the first time just how Mexican the supermercado is. I guess Gringos never come in, or if they do, it's a housewife trying out a taco recipe for the first time. She is lost and looks around two or three times, studying each dark-skinned person in the store. And now here I am, the only mexicana, doing the exact same thing to the white people. I watch as the girls get baskets filled with sugary Gringo cereal, something my mama nunca compra y mi tio

nunca lleva, so I almost never ate it. I look for the items I am used to seeing in Uncle Tito's mercado, ingredients for chile rellena or el pan dulce that my mama cooks but I don't see any. I see rostros blancos on all the packaging; a smiling-Betty Crocker and that old man from the oatmeal, I see Chef Boy-ar-dee, maybe an inmigrante but still pretty much a Gringo. Here I am, in a Gringo store with a group of Gringo girls at a Gringo school in a Gringo town in a Gringo world.

"Rosa. Are you buying anything? We're almost ready to go"

I look at this group of girls, carrying full baskets of raisins and almonds, canned frijoles verdes and cans of soda. Me hunden y me respaldan. Ginny B comes up to me, full basket and says,

"We can totally share. I'm not gonna eat all this anyways, it's just kind of fun to go shopping and feel so adult, ya know? Like we're really on our own!"

And maybe they think they are but they're not. But I am, as the owner of the store stares me down extra as we stroll out.

I am hoping classes will give me a break. Everywhere I go it feels like everyone knows I'm not from some small Indiana town. And I always thought that was a good thing. I see a few black girls who walk around my building and give them a mirada that says I know and I understand. But a classroom I can handle because it don't matter where you're from it matters if you're smart, and I'm smart enough. Ginny B and I walk to class together because hers is at the same time and only a few minutes away. We carry hojitas de papel with the room number and class name written on them so we won't be those stupid freshman. I think of this idea and Ginny B thinks I am genius or something. Turns out she's pretty easy to impress. My first class is small in the Teaching College 4th floor, kind of like a home base for all the other teaching classes with a Dr. Dromen. I assume he's a dude because it seems like chicks don't get to teach college but they can teach high school. Which is bullshit 'cause maybe one day I wanna teach college. If there's one thing I know after having no dad and three brothers, it's that men are serious pendejos. And Dr. Dromen is no exception.

Everyone in the room introduces themselves, there are Josephs from Peru and Daniels from Bloomington, there was a Kathy from Avon. I don't recognize any of these towns or the names of any of my friends, there are no Jorges or Marias or Titos or Panchos. And there I sat, Rosa, the brown girl, the only person from out of town, the only person with two last names, from Chicago. Todos me miran longer than with anyone else. And when the introductions are over, Dr. Dromen says we should talk about our own high school experiences, what we liked and disliked, and if we think our views on that will change after our schooling. I thought that was cool and I also could have talked the whole fuckin' hour.

"Most of my high school goes on to be farmers, so I kinda think we had school centered around that. Like that was more important, real world stuff ya know? Because not that many people come to college anyways," said Jan from Bluffton. She has really curly, fine hair, which probably sucks for her. Also I cannot relate at all because why the hell would we learn about farming?

"I have something to complain about," I say.

"You went through the Chicago public school system," Dr. Dromen says while rolling his eyes, "I'm sure you have plenty of grievances, let's hear them". Me jodes? Fucking Jan gets to be pissed about farming school and I can't be

pissed about being mistreated for being Mexican?

“We had a walk out last year because our school wasn’t helpin’ us. They didn’t barely have any Spanish speakin’ teachers and we learned history so fucked up. ‘Cause some people come into school and don’t speak a ton of English if they’re new in town and they don’t get to really learn. And basically nobody goes to college and they tell us we can’t because we’re Mexican and it’s some bullshit ya know?”

I end my rant and realize eyes are on me again. Burning through me. I’m confused ‘cause someone asked my opinion and gave it.

“First of all, I’m going to have to ask that that language is never used in my class. You are future educators, sound educated. My opinion of you matters, you should be trying to impress me. Second of all, you are in America, you are planning to teach in English, and all of your classes here will be in English. Also maybe you didn’t have a lot of Spanish speaking teachers because a lot of those people don’t have the education to teach.”

Y después de esto, me di cuenta que estoy sola en esta lucha aquí en Middletown, Indiana. Que Dr. Dromen ni las Nancys o los Johns nunca me van a ayudar. Que tengo yo dos opciones: quedarme aquí, en Middletown, Indiana, con esta gente, luchando por la raza. O salir, irme a Chicago y estar con familia, amigos, con gente mía.

Part 5

# Restraining the Young

“The simple truth is that you can understand a town.  
You can know and love and hate it.  
You can blame it, resent it, and nothing changes.  
In the end, you’re just another part of it.”

--Brenna Yovanoff, *The Replacement*



# The Lunatics

Robert Young

*(1975)*

The morning that Scott died was just like any other. We had all come home separately, after the gig. Clair and I packed up and went straight home, but I think Rog and Scott stayed out later. I think Rog said they were going out a bar, maybe the Barn Burner, to celebrate. I remember we were all giddy with excitement – the gig had gone over well, exceptionally well actually. We couldn't help thinking about what the future had in store for us, but a certain air of somberness hung over it all. We were all feeling for Scott and what he was going through. I think that's why Clair and I didn't feel like going out that night. It was around three in the morning, and we were both exhausted. We talked all the way home about whether we'd finally get that record deal.

Home was the kind of place where music was always playing, and the neighbors complained constantly. Upstairs, downstairs, a few rooms over – it didn't matter, you could never escape the dull throb of bass. When a record reached its end, whoever was around was obligated to flip it, or pick out the next one. We did this wordlessly and without complaint. It was an unspoken agreement. The only time the record player was turned off was when no one was home, and even then we'd forgotten and left it on a few times.

It was not a very livable house, to be honest. A living room, no TV, barely any counter space in the cramped kitchen, creaking stairs leading to the three bedrooms upstairs, and an overall sense of falling-downness. We never thought about cleaning the place up. It was just a phase, this place, a transition that we'd eventually move past. Rog and Clair were looking for better houses, or even a large apartment that we could take, especially since the gig money was starting to flow in. Things were looking up.

I walked down the stairs, stepping gingerly on the steps to avoid candy wrappers and other debris. The morning after gigs, or afternoon after since we were all late sleepers, was always a sluggish one. Probably because most of us were usually hungover, but this one was different. Irvings auditorium was on the MU campus, so booze was a no go. Stepping up to a window, I pulled the curtain back, sunlight stinging my eyes, before groaning and shuffling into the living room, which was the only room in the house that was kept up well, but it was still cluttered in its own way. The piano, an old upright, was flush against the far wall

next to the window, which was right next to the corner where Rog's drum set was, or it would have been. His drums were there, but he hadn't unpacked them from the cases yet. The rest of the room was filled with guitar stands, folding chairs, and a cheap couch that sagged and protested anytime someone sat in it.

The only thing left, the only thing in the house that any of us had sunk any large amount of money and time into was the record player, which was constantly kept free of dust, had its own cabinet to sit on, and had an elaborate filing system for the records. I stepped up to it, lifting the dust cover with a yawn, and without looking, pulled a record up and out of the sleeve, settling it neatly onto the player and gently placing the needle on the first track.

A few seconds passed and then the music started, B.B. King's *Live at the Regal*, one of Scott's favorites. I waited for the music to start, the scratch of the record filling my ears, before meandering into the kitchen. The fridge was pretty much bare. We usually put off going to Marshers Grocery until the last minute, and the bars we played in usually gave us free food. Still, my stomach grumbled and I wasn't about to ignore that, so I grabbed the last few eggs and set out to make an omelet. I always insisted that I was making an omelet, but it usually ended up being scrambled. Scott always joked with me about my cooking. "Oh come on Sarah," he'd say, "Don't tell me we're ordering take out again." Scott was actually the best cook among all of us, so we usually ate what he prepared, or all worked together on some sort of dish.

Someone was descending the staircase, although I heard the muffled movement from above long before the staircase gave it away. Muffled curses and grumbles floated down the hall, so without looking I knew it was Clair.

"Morning," I said, my voice a little hoarse.

"Mmm," she grunted back, collapsing into a chair.

"Eggs?" I asked.

"Mmm," she grunted, rubbing her temple, brushing hair away.

I returned to my cooking, listening to the sizzling of the faint music, the fuzz of eggs in a pan.

"Rog here?" I said.

"Upstairs," Clair said, standing up and walking over to fridge, pulling out the milk and drinking straight from the carton.

Almost on cue, I started to hear heavy footfalls plodding around. Rog always seemed a whole lot more uncoordinated than he really was. The way he walked always made me think he was trying to shove his feet through the floor.

"Morning," he said, surprisingly chipper sounding. He sat down next to Clair and snatched the carton of milk out of her hands. "Didn't Dad teach you better?" he grinned, taking a swig of milk himself. Clair squinted daggers at him and rolled her eyes.

"I'll go wake Scott up," she said, punching Rog in the back of the head as she left, making him choke and sputter. I couldn't help but chuckle.

Rog recovered, lounging in the uncomfortable kitchen chair with his feet up on the table and said, "So how do you think it went last night?"

I pulled four plates out of the cabinet and started dolling out servings onto them, placing them on the table before shoving Rog's feet off the table and sitting down. "God, I still can't believe it. It feels like a dream you know?"

"I hear that," he nodded, shoveling eggs into his mouth.

"I feel really good about it," I said, "We all played really well."

"Especially Scott," Rog muttered, "I mean, damn. He was on a different planet."

I nodded and looked up at the ceiling. Last night was still burned into my mind – the lights, the screaming crowd. The show didn't even have the rocky start we usually had.

"Do you think Mr. Jones will make an offer?" I asked.

Rog stopped chewing and then contemplated for a second. "I don't see how he couldn't. We played a damn good show."

I smiled at the thought: producing a record. A first album. It was all so exciting, and we'd all worked so hard for it. When Clair came back down the stairs, I was so lost in my daydream that I didn't even hear her at first.

"Did Scott come home last night?" she asked. Both Rog and I shrugged and looked at her. "His car's not in the driveway, he's not here, and neither is his guitar," she said.

Of course, the first thing that went through my mind was some sort of logical explanation. "Maybe he went to his mom—" I said, stuttering and realizing my mistake. A few unfortunate, awkward glances exchanged between me, Clair, and Rog. "His mom's place."

Rog shook his head. "He wouldn't go back there," he muttered dejectedly.

When the phone rang, it arrested all of our attentions. For a second we all froze, unable to move to answer it. I think deep down, we all were afraid to answer it. Somehow we knew that it wouldn't be good, and if we refused to answer it, maybe the bad news wouldn't come. Maybe if we don't answer it, Scott's car will just pull up in the driveway and he'll walk in with donuts under his arm, a big smile on his face and congratulations all around. He'll have met with Mr. Jones and confirmed that we got the record deal, the proof of it: a check between his fingers.

I was the first to move, ripping it off the receiver in one swift motion to just get it over with, like a Band-Aid.

"Hello?" I asked, trembling.

"Hello, is this Sarah Palmer I'm hearing?" the voice asked.

"It is." I placed the voice to be Sheriff Carey's. I'd never been in trouble with the police before, but it was a small enough town that I'd run into the Sheriff a few times.

"Hey Sarah. I'm sorry, but I've got some terrible news," he said gravely. Everything went numb. Somehow I knew before he said it, Scott was dead. I stood stock-still. All I could focus on was the sound of the needle having reached the end of the first side, the skip-skip-skip of the record needing to be flipped in the living room.

When I walked in the house for the first time ever, the first thing that I noticed was the music. Hell, I could hear the music from the street when I pulled up. The dull thud of a base drum shaking the foundation and the twang of a guitar were easily audible in the driveway. Later on after we had played our first couple of shows, mildly successful, maybe, it was a sound that I would become quite accustomed to. I always felt guilty because I practiced the least, but Scott always insisted I was the most talented out of all of us.

Shutting the door I took a hard right and entered the living room. Sure enough, there were Scott and Rog, tuning up and just messing around. They exchanged a few quick glances before Scott got up and shook my hand.

"You must be Sarah," he smiled.

"Yeah, you must be the guys who need another musician," I replied nervously.

Scott grinned and stepped aside so I could walk in. "Damn right," he laughed, offering me a seat on the piano bench.

"College kid," Clair grunted, shuffling in from the kitchen and taking a seat, ignoring me as she picked up a guitar and fiddled with it, "You a music student?"

"No," I replied, looking over at the record player, "Teaching."

We didn't get into it that evening, but as I'd later tell Scott, I was just tired of being told what to do in life. The choice to drop out was one of the easiest decisions I'd ever made.

"The fuck you know about music then?" Clair laughed, rolling her eyes.

I looked over at her, with a shitty look on my face before pointing to the piano in the corner. "I've been playing that since I was a kid, I can read music, I've been trying to learn guitar lately, and," I said, stopping to clear my throat before muttering, "and I've been trying to write a few songs lately."

Clair snorted. I later found out, after she warmed up to me, that she was against adding a new member. Stubbornly insisting that the three of them were enough, she resisted it as long as she could.

Scott raised an eyebrow. "I know we could certainly use some help in that department," he said, pointing at the piano, "Play."

Such a simple order caught me off guard, and for the first time that evening, it occurred to me that I would be asked to play my instrument at an audition. Cursing my own naïve sense of how things looked, I turned and cracked my knuckles before settling my hands on the keys. That's when I realized that there was no sheet music on the stand.

"What?" I asked.

Scott merely shrugged his shoulders and waved his hand at me. Nervous and not wanting to completely ruin my chances, I played the first thing I could remember: a classical piece, some Beethoven. It went well enough, all though I stuttered a bit over some of the more difficult parts, which Clair smirked at, but Scott remained stone faced. It was Rog who made the first move to join in, picking up his sticks and dropping a simple beat on the high hat to augment the natural rhythm of the piece. It was awkward for me, but I eventually loosened up and let myself get carried away with the feel of it. My years of piano lessons and playing in church hadn't prepared me for what I would eventually fall in love with: the jam session.

It was when Rog and I had played for a few minutes that I finally decided to test the waters and break free. Abruptly, I shifted the song and stopped playing Beethoven, switching into some strange hybrid between a Emerson Lake & Palmer song I couldn't quite remember, and something of my own, a little riff that I probably stole from somewhere but couldn't remember where. I looked over, Rog having caught on with what I was doing, and he had adjusted the rhythm accordingly. When Scott joined in too, we really started to have some fun.

I was amazed at Scott's ability to figure out the riff so well. I found out later

that Scott couldn't actually read or write music at all. Instead, he played totally by ear. He learned instruments by listening to the end product, a record, and then found the corresponding note based on sound alone. His guitar squealed and tore into the song, joining along with a sound that dominated, but surprisingly, he didn't take the opportunity to tear into a face-melting guitar solo. He knew I was the one being judged here, and he just wanted to see what I could do, so he turned his volume knob down and joined the rhythm section.

Instead, I took a breath and used the opportunity, breaking free a bit into a piano solo, or at least my attempt at a solo. I improvised, using the same notes as before but rearranged, and I also stole bits and pieces of older jazz numbers I'd heard, but I figured they wouldn't notice. A few minutes must have passed because, we eventually stopped and I looked up expectantly.

"We certainly have never played Beethoven before, and was that some The-lonious Monk I heard in there?" Scott said.

"Uh, yeah," I stuttered, not expecting him to be able to pinpoint my theft so quickly.

They eventually all left the room to deliberate, deciding my fate. They would of course decide to give me a shot. Later, after Scott's mom died, a day before the big show at the Irving's, the auditorium on the campus of Middletown University, we sat and talked about my all those early practices. How bad we were, but how great we would become.

There weren't that many people at the funeral. It was sunny and bright, the early morning dew settled on blades of grass. The Brookley Funeral home in Middletown took care of all the arrangements, just as they do every death in this town. Charlotte, the owner of the funeral home, had many kind words to say, but I only felt numb and alone, so I didn't say much to her. As the coffin descended into the earth, Clair clutched her fists and then turned to leave. Rog stood in silence, leaving after his sister while I remained, staring at the headstone. The cold, gray stone was new, not yet covered in moss or ivy. It was fresh like the one right next to it for Scott's mother.

"It's a real shame isn't it, he was amazing," a man's voice said behind me.

"Mhmm," I said, gritting my teeth, not turning around and recognizing the voice as belonging to Mr. Jones.

Mr. Jones, a tall man with oval spectacles, was the type of person who wore a suit everyday. His funeral attire was indistinguishable from his everyday attire. Stepping up beside me, he shook his head and sighed.

"Look, I'm gonna be frank with you. I was going to give you guys a shot. Fly you out to New York and record some stuff. But—" he said, stopping abruptly to wipe a smudge of dirt off of his glasses, "He was the main reason."

I stiffened up, thinking back to the hours that Scott and I spent talking about what we'd do when we got famous. He insisted on buying at least one thing that was solid gold, but not a toilet. I was more dazzled by the allure of champagne and limousines, late night parties, and the status associated with being a rock star. It was our dream. It belonged to all of us.

I remember thinking back. Dropping out, I was practically disowned. I couldn't go back, there was nothing back.

"You couldn't even wait until he was in the fucking ground to bring that up,"

I snarled, turning and walking back to the car.

"I'll call you," Mr. Jones called after me.

I wanted to yell back something like, "Fuck off!" but I couldn't muster the courage, or even the energy.

It was one of the first times I had ever driven somewhere without having the radio on. I was too afraid at what I'd hear, one Scott and mine's favorite songs, no doubt. I didn't hear music again until I parked the car, fell into a chair in the living room, and picked up Scott's guitar.

The case was bashed up pretty good, but the guitar inside was without a scratch. It was one of the only things that the police were able to retrieve from the wreck. Wrapping your car around a tree tends to do that. The sheriff said he was drunk, was out at a bar after the show, drinking alone. He tried to drive home, and that was it.

Holding the guitar, an American Stratocaster, solid body with a triple sunburst finish and single-coil pickups, in my hands, I ran my hand down the body, up and down the cool strings, plucking one and lazily tuning it. The instrument felt awkward in my hand, like it didn't belong to me. I was filled with the profound sense of wrongness as I played a chord, strumming along quietly to a song no one could hear. Part of me knew that the dream was over. We'd never get another shot like this again. That was it.

Smoke rises in lazy wisps from the end of a cigarette nestled between Scott's fingers, and I watch as he bores his eyes into the floor, a frown on his face. I notice that he hasn't taken a single drag since he lit it. Everyone has their own rituals for handling the pre-show jitters: Clair paces back and forth and mutters curses at the people and things she sees, whereas Rog was a fan of making several trips to the bathroom to either nervously stare into the mirror and sweat, or even throw up a little. I like to tap my foot – click my heels to the beats of the songs that run through my head. But Scott never seemed to be affected like we were. He'd walk back and forth between us, patting us on the shoulder and reassuring us. "Everything's gonna go great out there. Let's blow the roof off this place," he'd smile. It was that way at Fox's Music Hall, The Barn Burner, and all the other places we played in Middletown. Hell, he was nothing but smiles even when we played outside of Middletown.

But this was different. We'd never played anything as big as Irvings, the auditorium on campus. Maybe it was the sound of the crowd, slowly rising in volume and intensity to the point where you could feel the stamp of feet and the drone of a few thousand people in your chest. Scott was quiet. I worried about him; we all were. He missed every practice this week, and none of us had seen him in days, not since his mother's funeral anyway. When he showed up tonight, guitar in hand, I asked him if he was ok. He only nodded and pushed past me to go set up his stuff on stage. We all knew how close he was with his mother, how she was the one who got him into music and taught him guitar. As sympathetic as I tried to be towards him, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling in the back of my mind that, as someone who still had both parents, as someone whose father didn't run off when I was five, as someone who had lived in comfort my whole life, I could never understand what he was going through.

It was still Scott's dream though. All of our dreams: to make it big. To make

it out of Middletown, to achieve fame and fortune, and to make music. It was the music that came from somewhere, that rose up from deep within yourself. That was art. That's what we all loved. That's what we all wanted to be a part of. There is no greater compliment in the world than finishing an album and immediately flipping it back over to start at the beginning. Maybe if we finally got that record deal it would be the end of the dimly lit, smoky bars with chicken wire to separate us from the hicks who would lob bottles at us, and drunkenly request "Free Bird" for the ninth time. We just needed a record first.

One of the techs, a young college kid, came backstage to tell us it was time. Rog picks up his drumsticks and we all follow him down a narrow corridor. The first few steps out onto that illuminated stage take my breath away. I have to squint from the bright lights. The sheer amount of noise already rolling over me assures me that I'll be deaf after the show. I see Rog settle in, his drum kit in the back against a black curtain like a nail holding everything down. I take my spot, to the right of Rog, but facing everyone so I can clearly see. The auditorium has wheeled out this beautiful black, upright piano for me, my synthesizer right next to it along with my guitar. I wipe a bead of sweat from my forehead and settle down, plinking and plonking a bit, my fingers nestling into the slickly cool blocks of ivory. Scott and Clair exchange a quick glance as they pick up their instruments, Scott's guitar and Clair's bass. Clair forces a smile; Scott doesn't seem to notice. He's lost in his rituals, in his mind, going through a last minute tune up.

Stepping over to me, fingers fiddling with the tuners on the guitar's headstock, Scott meets my gaze and says, "This is it."

"Scott, are you gonna be ok?" I ask.

"Don't worry about me," he muttered. He looked at the floor and then out at the crowd before turning back to me and smiling, a quivering half-smile.

I smiled back and nodded. "Then let's kick some ass."

He shut his eyes and laughed, turning his back to me and moving up to the front of the stage next to Clair where his pedal board and microphone were set up. Clair was getting everyone hyped up, yelling into her mike and introducing the band. She called out my name and I instinctually waved to the audience. A shifting spotlight settled on me and blinded me. Rog responded to his introduction by cracking out a quick roll down the kit, a miniature banging drum solo to make people cheer. Scott didn't seem to notice the audience as he muttered wordlessly to himself.

We all exchanged a few quick glances before Rog launched into our opener: Led Zeppelin's "Rock and Roll." We had planned the set list out ahead of time, and it was unanimous. Something fast and fun to get the people up on their feet, and when Clair stepped up to the mike and ripped into the song, people were up on their feet, singing along and clapping. Everything was in remarkable harmony – the band, the crowd, the way the dust settles in the light. As my hands slid up and down the keys, mashing out my chords, I closed my eyes and listened. I could feel Clair's growling vocals reverberate in my chest. I could feel the thump thump of the bass drum replace my own heartbeat, and when Scott tore into the guitar solo, my spine erupted in chills. He drove into it almost effortlessly, his fingers cleanly hitting every note until they blurred and he was shaking his head back and forth. It was the best damn thing anyone had ever heard, until we finished and went to the next song, that is.

Moments spun together in the euphoria, and a time came when I didn't really know what song we were playing anymore. It was just like we back home, jamming and messing around. If one of us decided to extend a certain solo, or up the tempo, or drift into another song entirely, we all followed. We played off one another naturally, just like we always did. The set list that we had decided on was a mix of crowd pleasers, staples, and some of our own songs: songs that Scott had written, songs that I had written, and songs that we both worked on together. We pulled out all the stops for this one. Mr. Jones, the producer, was in the crowd after all. He had heard about the little band from Middletown, playing shows and venues all over the Midwest. Word about us spread until our name, The Lunatics, crossed his desk. When he found out we had managed to sell out one of the biggest venues in the area, he called and told us he'd be there, wishing us luck. It was a fact that we all struggled to put out of our minds: we were gambling with our futures here.

At one point, in between songs, a Stones tune and one that I had written, which Scott insisted was the best thing that either of us had to offer, Rog waved me down to throw him a towel so he could wipe the sweat off his face and the blood off of his hands. His shirt was soaked, and even though we all were sweaty, he clearly had us beat. The next song was one that Scott and I worked on together. It started off slowly, with Scott playing a spacey, unearthly string of notes accented by a mystical, droning hum that I played on my synth. He sang a bit of a verse, followed up by me singing the next bit. We'd then both harmonize background vocals for Clair during the chorus, an explosion that took us back to reality. It was something we'd worked tirelessly on, and it was going well. By the time we hit the second chorus, people were singing along with the melody, having already picked up the words. Scott turned to face me and we locked eyes for a second. Our voices harmonized well, and together we made a nice contrast with Clair. Scott and I were melodic, forming a lyrical background for Clair's trembling snarl to rip through the ether. It was a moody song that seemed to rise and fall dreamily, and I noticed that people in the audience were rocking back and forth.

The show ended on a high note: an extended jam on The Beatles' song "The End," complete with dueling guitar solos. Somehow Scott had talked me into playing guitar with him on it. Even though I had only been playing the instrument for less than a year now, he insisted that I could do it. So we practiced and practiced for hours together, until fingers were bleeding and we had run out of beer. Scott was nice enough to let me play the easier part of the song, nor did he show off too much either, even though we both knew he was the better guitarist. He pulled back and showed remarkable restraint. Sometimes it amazed me how Scott was able to put the good of the song first, sacrificing a more complex and impressive guitar part for something that just plain sounded better. He always said that 90% of guitar solos were "self-indulgent, pissing contests," and that more often than not, they detracted from popular songs rather than added to them. Scott, Clair, and I gathered around center stage, facing each other under a single spotlight. And as we finished up the song, I couldn't help but look up and cheer, knowing that we nailed it. I almost forgot to run back over to the piano and play the ending, a gentle little fade out, ending in cheers.

Suddenly, the night was over, and it didn't feel like any time had passed at



all. We bowed, and I couldn't believe it – three thousand people on their feet, begging for more. We'd rarely done an encore before, and we hadn't even discussed whether or not we would do one, but when Scott looked at us and muttered, "Fuck it, let's do one more," I knew none of us would oppose.

When we returned to our places, picking our instruments back up again, the crowd erupted in approval. The thought occurred to me that we had no idea what to play next, and when I shouted to Scott as loud as I could over the roar of the crowd, "What are we playing?" he responded with a shrug and a wave of his hand that I knew meant, "Just wing it!"

Things got quiet as Scott started playing his guitar. It was a bluesy little lick, smooth and powerful like it absorbed every other sound. Scott held his notes to the exact perfect moment, hanging on those little bends and vibrato he threw in until the note faded away into a little pause of silence. Eventually, Scott stopped playing individual notes and switched to chords, improvising a short little riff that was easy to follow along to. Rog joined in next, followed closely by Clair, bass and drums laying down a foundation to this song, and once I found the notes, so did I, playing chords along with Scott. He looked to me for a second and nodded his head, which I knew meant he wanted me to take the lead, so I did. Jumping up an octave, instinct took over, and I managed to find a melodic interlude, the keys sinking and rising under my fingers, their weight felt against my skin. I let the music guide me, and it felt like I wasn't in control of my body anymore. I started smashing my hands against the keys, making a bunch of noise that somehow fit into the rest of the music before I slid my hands down from end to end, rolling the notes. When I stopped and looked back to Scott, his eyes were downcast. He switched pickups, and then he played.

It was a single note, droning on and on longer than I thought possible that sucked the air out of everyone's throats. It fluttered high, soaring on unseen sound waves before it dipped and dove as he ratcheted the whammy bar down hard, dive bombing into his next three notes, which rang out in my eardrums and pierced me like a gunshot. I closed my eyes and stopped playing, just listening to the music, like a scorching razor cutting through fog and the dust that swirled in the air.

I opened my eyes and watched him, watched him pour himself into the music and throw his body into it. Like a piece of driftwood caught in a rapid, he shook and swayed, looking like he was about to fall over under the weight of it all. Thousands of people watched. Thousands of people listened as Scott cut his own heart out with guitar strings. It was like he was tearing the music out of his instrument, filling the theater with electricity and visceral emotion. This was a completely different plane, one that I'd never heard from him before. There was never any doubt in my mind that Scott Peterson was a great musician, but this was something more. All the while, he just kept staring down at his guitar, fingers waltzing on the rose wood.

He left shortly after the show. Didn't say where he was going. I didn't know at the time that he'd be dead in three hours. If I did, I would've said something. A goodbye, a congratulations, an anything. But I didn't. Clair, Rog, and I stood and celebrated our fortune. We excitedly discussed the prospects that we had for the future. Scott just packed up his guitar and left, slipped out when we weren't looking. The last time I saw him, he was tuning his guitar, eying it with a melancholy

look. He ran his hand down the body. It was more than just an instrument, it was a piece of himself.

Placing it into his hard-shelled guitar case, Scott clicked the latches and shut it away. He held onto it for a second before bowing out the back exit, the door closing behind gently. Outside the rain began fall.

# Put on a Brave Face

Lauryn Wiseman

(1979/1989)

***Evan Abbott***

When I woke up I saw my grandma's face. She wasn't smiling. I tried to talk, but I couldn't. I didn't understand why I couldn't hear my voice except inside my head. I didn't understand why my head hurt so much.

Grandma saw my eyes were open and she started crying and yelling a lot. Some ladies came into the room and started messing around with machines. There was a long tube that I followed until I saw it was taped to my arm. I didn't feel it there, it just looked funny. Grandma started crying and touching my arm and asking the ladies if I was alright. If I would be alright. One of them said she didn't know. Of course I'm alright. I'm here. I don't know where here is.

A man in a white coat came in. He had a pen and some paper on a clipboard in his hand. He started asking me questions, but I still couldn't answer. It hurt when I tried to talk. Grandma must have known that cause she told him not to ask me any more questions. He breathed out heavy the way mommy does after she's had a fight with her boyfriend. She calls them "arguments" but she always has bruises after them.

The man took grandma aside and they started whispering. I have good hearing. They said my name a couple times and grandma looked at me with a weird face and started crying. I wanted to ask what was happening and I got out a noise, but it wasn't a real word.

The lady was still in the room and she smiled at me, but it looked sad. She looked tired. Mommy always looked tired too. She works a lot.

Grandma and the man came back to the bed and the man looked at me and asked me if I knew where I was. I tried to shake my head no, but that hurt too. Why did my head hurt? I remembered last night. I think it was last night. It seemed like it. The bad dream, going to mommy's room. She told me it was okay, it was just a nightmare. We fell asleep after that. Then the light came on and he was there. I hate him. I've always hated him. He yelled at mommy a lot. He wasn't there very much, but I hated when he was. I think he hit me.

The man in the white coat was telling me he was a doctor and I was in a hospital. He said I was hurt. I knew that, because my head hurt. He kept talking but I didn't understand what he was saying. I wanted to ask where mommy was. I just

wanted her to be here. She always told me things were going to be okay and she kissed my hurt places to make them better. I wanted her to kiss my entire head and tell me I would get better soon.

Grandma leaned over me and held my hand. Her grip was tight and she started crying again. She told me my dad was coming to see me. He would be here soon. I hadn't seen him for a long time, and I still didn't get why grandma was crying. He wasn't that bad.

I fell asleep waiting for dad and woke up to his face in mine. His eyes looked tired. He said he had something important to tell me. He said it was hard. It was hard for me not to be able to ask what he wanted to say. He kept trying to tell me and then he'd stop. I just wanted to ask what he wanted to tell me.

I looked around the room and saw it was only dad and me there. He finally told me what he was trying to say.

"Evan, I—I need you to listen carefully. Do you understand? Um, blink if you understand." I shut my eyes and opened them again quick. "Okay, good. Now, this is difficult for me to tell you, son. Do you remember anything? Do you know why you're here? Blink if you know." This time I kept my eyes open. "Oh. Well, that's fine. Son, the reason you're here—well—you're here because there was someone very bad who came into the duplex. Now, we don't know who, but we're working hard to find out, but son, they hurt you. They hurt you bad. And I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but" dad's voice was starting to sound funny. Mommy's voice always sounded that way before she cried and I hoped dad wasn't going to cry. "Evan, they hurt your mom worse than they hurt you. Mommy isn't with us anymore." I didn't understand what he was saying. I knew mommy wasn't with us. I hadn't even seen mommy since I'd been here.

"Evan? Do you know what I'm saying? Someone very bad hurt mommy. Someone took her away and she can't come back. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I started to remember more from that night. The bad man. The man I always hated. Mommy asked him what he was doing there and he hit her. I started to cry and he yelled and hit me. He hit me a lot. Then he kept hitting mommy and I must have fallen asleep because I didn't remember anything after that.

"Evan, Evan I am so sorry." Dad kept saying this over and over again. He sounded like one of mommy's records when it had a scratch in it. He started crying. I understood what he was saying and I started crying too. It hurt to cry.

### ***Clara Abbott***

*March 19, 1979*

I have to do it. I have to. If not for me then for Evan. It isn't healthy for him to see this. Besides, Michael is *married*. He has his own family, his own children. I'm ruining so many things.

Michael was sweet at first, he got me on my feet, paid for some outstanding debts, small ones. He even bought me groceries from time to time. I couldn't even begin to understand what he saw in me. I'm no beauty queen. But that's just how things go sometimes. It was so hard raising Evan on my own. And Michael offered to help out in any way possible. I thought he could be a role-model for Evan, show him all the things men need to know in the world. I could never be able to tell Evan how to be a man. But it is so clear that Evan doesn't like Mi-

chael. Why should he? I guess four year olds are more in tune than they're given credit for. I can make it work. I'll just tell Michael I can't see him anymore. But that won't work. He'll get upset. He'll probably hit me again. The last time he hit me I had a black eye for a week. But he had been drinking, of course. That time. I just have to tell him when he's sober. It'll all work out. I'll pick up more hours at the restaurant. Aunt Jane should be more than fine with that. But then I'll need the sitter to spend more time with Evan and I'll have to pay her for that. Oh, this is hopeless. But I have to get away from Mike. I have to. If not for me, then for Evan. What if he hurts Evan?

*March 21, 1979*

I did it. I told Michael I didn't want to do this anymore. I told him it was wrong. He has a wife, a family. He got angry. It scared me and he grabbed my arm so hard I thought he might break it. He told me I couldn't do that. I couldn't just walk away from him after everything he'd done for me. I told him he was right. That was so stupid of me. I just let him convince me not to leave him. But poor Evan. He's been having nightmares. He comes into my room at night and says he's scared the bad man might get me. I'm scared too. But I put on a brave face and tell him mamma won't let anything bad happen to either of us, even though I'm afraid I already have.

*March 22, 1979*

Michael came over and we got into a big argument. I tried to tell him it was over again and he kept screaming and spitting in my face. I told him I was sorry and he tried to kiss me but I bit him. He screamed louder. Evan came out of his room and had to see me pinned to the refrigerator. I tried so hard to stay calm and tell him to go back to bed. Mommy would be okay. But I could only get out "back... bed." Thank god he understood. I watched as he dragged his teddy bear back through the doorway as Michael shook me, slamming my back into the fridge. I was just thankful Evan wasn't seeing it, although I was sure he could hear it all through the thin walls. I know Larry must have heard something, but he's stopped calling the police after the first few times. Maybe he sleeps with earplugs or music now. Sometimes I hear a TV coming through the bedroom wall. I guess he's desperate to drown out the arguments. I don't really blame him. I feel like an idiot.

Things got worse with Michael after Evan went back to his room. I couldn't stop crying and Mike wouldn't stop screaming and his hands were getting tighter around my arms and the next thing I knew he had a hand around my neck and it was getting harder to breathe and harder to cry. I don't know what made him let go. But I don't think I can tell him I want to leave him again. At least not in person.

*March 24, 1979*

Michael was here watching the basketball game with me tonight. He was actually being pleasant. He does that, one day he'll be so mean and the next he's Mr. Good Guy. It's probably good that he was kinder tonight, since most of my friends attended the big game. Even mom and Molly went. I know mom hates Mike and she would have made such a fuss if she knew he was here tonight.

Mom knows I've been trying to leave him, too. She keeps trying to give me advice and telling me to just run over to her house when things go wrong. But I can't just run across the street every time I have a fight with Michael. I'm scared he might follow me, and Molly doesn't need to witness any of this. Being a ten year old girl is hard enough without seeing a sister you look up to distraught and trapped. No, I just can't impose on Mama and Molly that way. They don't know how truly bad things are.

At least Mike was in a good mood tonight. Especially since Middletown Central won. I can't say it was surprising, Coach Harrell seems to know what he's doing. Maybe one day Evan would like to play basketball. Maybe he'll go to the IHSAA Championship and I'll be there, as close to the court as I can be, cheering him on. Maybe Mike can be there too. He's doing better. Maybe he can be the role model Evan so desperately needs. His dad doesn't seem to want to be there for him. It's been nearly a year since he's made an effort to see his son. He calls every once in awhile and Evan is always so happy to talk to his daddy. He makes me so mad sometimes. He doesn't understand what I've had to sacrifice for Evan. He still has everything he worked for and thinks it's good enough just to call. If not for Ricky Garrett, I could have gone to college. My grades were good enough to get me into Middletown College. Mom would have loved that. She would have been so proud. But that's all behind me.

I knew I shouldn't have gone to that Lunatics concert nearly five years ago. I never should have set foot in Irvings Auditorium that night. But that band was good and Ricky knew I loved them. I'd been anywhere that would allow a sixteen year old inside just to see them play. Ricky told me this concert would be their break and I'd be witnessing history in the making. He was always good with words. I knew I shouldn't have let him convince me everything would be fine, even without a condom. I honestly could have done so much more with my life. Don't get me wrong, I am so grateful for and blessed to have Evan. He's my little man. If I didn't have Evan, I would feel so alone. But I can't help but to think sometimes how life might be different if my choices had been different.

You know, I taught Evan how to ride a bike the other day. He was so precious. He got scared and kept asking me not to let go. Of course I did. Of course I had to. He wouldn't learn if I hadn't let go. Besides, he couldn't fall with training wheels. He is such a precious angel though. I really am lucky to have him. Oh no, Evan's had another bad dream. He just came in and asked if he could sleep in here tonight. Poor baby. I have to find a way to end this.

### ***Michael White***

Clara tried to break up with me twice. I didn't even think she had it in her to try once. I had to be on my best behavior tonight. So I brought over a six pack of beers and we watched Middletown Central beat the piss out of Anderson. I was worried when McCallum injured his ankle, but he came back in a blaze of glory. He's got an iron will, that one. Yep, that kid is sure something. He played a hell of a game for being so scrawny. Kid's gonna do great things in the basketball world.

After the game, I went home to my wife and kids. Having four kids is hard. Even when I get a break, I don't get a break. Clara's always expecting me to be

some kind of dad to her kid. Kid hates me though. He gets all squirmy when I'm around. Shit, I didn't do a damn thing to hurt him. I don't know why the kid gets that way with me. My kids are all tucked away in bed right now, so you know, I took this quiet drive. Down the street, around the block, stop at the liquor store. A bottle of something something doesn't hurt.

Clara was alright tonight. But I just cannot believe the bitch tried to leave me *twice*. After all the shit I've done for her. And for her ungrateful kid too. Kid can't even sleep in his own bed some nights. He's about to be five years old and still goes crawling into bed with mommy after he's had a nightmare. I wouldn't allow it. Clara's too damn soft. She caved so easily when I told her we had to stay together. I can't believe she thinks I need her that badly. I don't know why I expect more from her. She got pregnant her senior year of high school and was dumb enough to marry the idiot that knocked her up. Divorced by the time she was twenty. No wonder she needs me so much. She'd believe anything I told her.

Uh, I think I'll go over to Clara's again. See if I can get something from her. I was perfectly behaved earlier tonight. I deserve something for my good behavior. God, her dumpy duplex looks like shit. All these fucking kid toys in the yard. She needs a real house. With a real shed for all this shit. I'd give her one, but I've already given her a real man. Can't give her everything. Her ex certainly didn't give her jack. Except that rotten kid. He's the reason she tried to leave me. She knows he hates me. It bothers the shit out of her too.

All the lights are off, kid's probably in bed with her again. Fucking kid. He comes before anything else in Clara's life and I'm so fucking sick of it. I get enough of kids at home.

Well, I guess I'll just go inside, see what's going on. Yeah, you know. Just real quick go in. Damn door's locked. Fuck her, she probably knew I'd try to come by. Probably another poor attempt to keep me away. Fuck. Now what? I'll try the back door. She's been bugging me to replace the latch on it lately, so it's probably busted. I still can't believe she fucking tried to end things though. Dumb bitch. I'm better than anyone she'll ever have. Certainly better than that shithead she was married to and the fuck who came before me.

Fucking hell it's dark in here. Can't see whether the kid's in bed with her or not. Maybe they won't wake up if I put the light on?

"Michael? What are you doing here? How did you get in? You have to leave. Go home! I—I don't want to see you anymore! You can't just show up here in the middle of night and wake my son up! Wake me up! You have to *leave*, Michael! Do you hear me? Get out! Get out and don't ever come back!"

"You fucking bitch! You think you're going to get away with this?"

Shit, shit, fucking hell. I don't know what happened to me in there. I don't know what the fuck I just did. Oh, Jesus Christ. Fuck. I have to go change. I have to get this fucking blood off my hands. Shit. What did I fucking *do*? What *happened* to me in there? God damn. I just got so angry. She fucking tried it again. She said she never wanted to fucking see me again. What the fuck is she thinking? She fucking thinks she can leave me. Fuck her. Fuck that kid. He fucking hates me. Well, I hate him too. He's always in the way. He's the whole damn reason Clara and I can never be together anymore. And she kept that fucking journal and wrote everything. Every damn punch I ever threw in her direction is in that fucking

journal. Shit. Trash pickup is in the morning. It'll be gone before anyone knows what happened. They won't have a damn shred against me.

Jesus. There's too many damn stop signs in this town. I have to get the hell out of these clothes. What the fuck do I tell people? Oh fuck, what if someone *saw* me? Like the fucking neighbor guy, shit. His bedroom is right next to hers. He probably heard it all. I have to get the *fuck* out of these clothes.

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"Larry, you have to fucking go over there, man. Clara killed herself. She fucking did it. She'd dead. She committed suicide," the words were out of my mouth before I knew what I was saying. It's a good cover though. No one can be convicted in a matter of suicide. I thought so fucking hard about what to do. I decided to return to the scene, pretty clever. If I phone in the deaths, then who would suspect me?

"What the fuck, Mike? Are you serious? Shit!" Larry ran out the door screaming at me and his fucking gasp when he entered Clara's bedroom. Guy should be an actor. I know he heard everything last night. But I was pretty fucking convincing just now. Entering his duplex without knocking was a nice touch.

"Did you call the fucking police, Mike?! What the hell, oh shit. She didn't fucking do this to herself. There's just...there's too much *blood*. Oh man, oh fuck...*Evan is still breathing!* Did you call the fucking police!? *He's opening his eyes!* Don't just fucking stand there! Shit! Do something!" I can't believe the kid is still breathing. There's a huge puddle of blood under him. And he fucking saw me last night. He knows I was here. Shit, fucking rotary phones. I tried to buy Clara a nice touch tone, but she said she liked this one. God, she was such a fucking idiot.

"Hello? Yes, I need an ambulance. I think my girlfriend is dead and her son, oh for fuck's sake, her son is laying on the floor and he's still breathing but shit he's lost a lot of blood. Yeah, 2301 Primrose Lane. Please fucking hurry, I don't know how long the kid can last," That should be convincing enough. "Yes, I'll stay on the line."

## ***Evan Abbott***

*1989*

It's been ten years and that bastard is still free and the worst part is I can't talk to anyone about it. Everyone just pretends it never happened. They act like I was produced from thin air, like my mother was never alive, she never walked the earth, she never died. But Michael killed her. I know he did. And reading her journals, I'm even more certain than I ever was, if that's possible.

It's so obvious, it's like staring everyone in the face and they can't even see it. The man may as well have the word "guilty" sharpied across his forehead. He turned the bedroom light on that night. I saw him with my own two eyes. And yeah, I was only four. And yeah, I suffered nine skull fractures, but other than the slight nerve damage, I'm fine. And nobody believes me. Or at least not strongly enough to put Michael White behind bars for the rest of his life. Something has to be done about him. There needs to be justice.



All of my friends talk about conversations they've had with their moms. I can't have those. I have a problem and I have to talk to my grandma, or an aunt. I just wish I could call my mom the way Dennis Hines does. His parents are divorced and he lives with his dad and his mom lives somewhere in Minnesota, so a phone call is all he gets. I wish I could get that. But Michael White took everything away from me. He took my mother, my ability to play sports, so now I'm this weird kid who walks a little funny and never takes his hat off. Meanwhile the fucker is living high and mighty with his four kids, and his wife, and his picture perfect life. I will never understand how his wife stayed with him through it all. He failed two lie detector tests. That third test was a fluke. It's like rock, paper, scissors, best two out of three. Michael White is guilty, and he deserves to be sentenced.

"Hey Evan, I'm gonna go to this party, so, you'll be alright alone, right?" Grandma was out of town visiting her sister, which left Aunt Molly in charge. She's only five years older than me, but she thinks she's allowed to tell me what to do all the time.

"I'm fifteen. I'm practically an adult. I can handle it," I speak slowly to let Molly know that I'm not an idiot, and she's kind of dumb for even asking if I'll be okay alone. Besides, I need her to think everything is okay. My plans depend on being home alone.

"Alright, great! I'll be back late, so, don't wait up, kid," I hate being referred to as kid.

When the Pinto backs out of the driveway and disappears around the corner, I go to my sock drawer and fetch the paper bag I've been hiding there for two weeks. I let the heavy object slide out into my outstretched hand, observing the barrel, the trigger, the sawed away serial number. It's just like the movies. I vowed to avenge the death of my mother, there seems no better way to do so after ten years of accusations that weren't taken seriously.

With everything the neighbors heard, and the videotape Sheriff Carey took when he questioned me, the videotape where five year old me very clearly states that Michael sent my mommy to heaven, they still won't listen. I'm still having nightmares about it. I go to sleep, and wake up drenched in sweat. I see his face floating behind my eyelids, laughing, like he got away with it. It's time for the nightmares to end.

Whoever thought it was a good idea to add the address of a murder suspect to the paper wasn't too bright. Tacoma is only about a nine minute bike ride from grandma's house. I'm not very good at riding a bike, no thanks to Michael. I was getting pretty good when mom was teaching me, but then I was only four and grandma had to pick up where she left off. But I don't even have a bike of my own anymore because I pedaled slower than Molly and she made fun of me for it. Well, looks like I have to use Molly's bike. It's an obnoxious shade of yellow, but it will get me there. You know, maybe the lack of speed was more the fact that I was ten years old rather than the slight paralysis gifted to me by Michael White. The bastard took more from me than he probably even knows or cares to know. I'll remind him.

Because I was stuck in the hospital for two weeks, I couldn't even go to my own mother's funeral. It was supposed to be years down the road, so far away I

wouldn't even be thinking of it now. But I have these newspaper clippings of all the case highlights and mom's obituary. I also found grandma's funeral program. Mom's funeral was held at the Brookley Funeral Home here in Middletown. I met the director once after I made a point to walk over there from school one day and recreate the funeral I couldn't go to. I wasn't even nearby when mom was put to rest, I was busy recuperating in Indy. A woman named Charlotte Sherwood greeted me at the funeral home. She told me she was the director and the embalmer of the home. I told her that was rad, I'd never met a lady embalmer before. Actually, I'd never met an embalmer at all. She was kind toward me when I told her why I was there. She even went to the trouble of digging up a copy of the program from mom's funeral so she could remember the case better. I could tell she remembered it fairly well, because at the sight of the program and mom's photo, she gave me the same sort of sad smile everyone gives when they remember mom and the circumstances surrounding her death.

The photo of mom in the program smiles out at me every time I open it. Sometimes I fall asleep next to it, the way I used to fall asleep next to mom after my nightmares. I'm always careful to put it back with the other articles when I wake up. I keep everything hidden in a notebook between the mattresses in my room. Grandma would wig out if she knew I had even half of this. But they're all her things. I found them in the garage, out of sight, out of mind. I've been thumbing through them for the better part of two years, and until a couple weeks ago, they were all that fueled my anger.

I had forgotten mom kept a journal back then, she always put it down when I came into her room. Opened up the nightstand drawer and slipped it in before opening her arms and her bed to me. Her eyes were big behind her glasses, and her hair was long and soft-looking. I don't remember much else, except how comforting her hugs were. I always fell asleep right after. Then, about two weeks ago, Uncle Larry gave me mom's journal and a long explanation of how he got ahold of it.

"Evan, I think you should have this. I don't want to upset you, but you've been asking me questions, and this could answer them maybe better than I could," That's when he produced the small notebook from his jacket pocket, pushing it into my hand. It must have been the look on my face that made him continue, "That night I heard it all. I wish I had done more to stop it, but truthfully, I just wanted to sleep. When there was finally silence, I found it difficult to doze off. I kept thinking about checking on your mother, seeing if you two were alright. I didn't know then that I would become a part of your family, otherwise I may have done more, sorry to say. Well, I went out the front door for a smoke and saw Michael leaving. I ducked into the shadows, just to be sure he wouldn't see me. I'm not sure why I did that, I guess I was afraid of him as much as your mother was. He was gruff, the kind of man you don't mess around with, probably still is. Well, Evan, before Michael ducked into his truck he looked around a bit, trying to see if anyone was watching, and he must've missed me looking at him because I guess he figured it was safe to dump something in the trash bin. When I saw his lights go round the corner, I opened the lid and right on top was a wad of paper towels and the corner of this journal sticking out under it. Even in the dim light, I recognized it right away from the times I saw your mother scribbling in it on the front porch. Well, I knew the trash would come in the morning and

it seemed important to grab it, so I did. And the next day, well, I'll spare you those details, you know them well enough. It never crossed my mind to give this journal to anyone other than their rightful owner, when the time came. And this is the time, Evan. This journal belongs with you more than anyone else. Maybe you can get to know the kind of woman your mom was better this way," at that, Uncle Larry gave my shoulder a squeeze and walked out of my room, toward the dinner grandma was preparing for us.

It was this speech combined with mom's words that fueled my bike ride to Michael White's house. The basket on Molly's bike proved helpful considering the circumstances. I found my backpack left me unbalanced if I tried to wear it while pedaling, so I plopped it in the front basket. It held the tool for Michael's demise. It was in my possession, just within reach. About a block out from the house, I got off the bike and continued on foot.

As I passed 2806 Tacoma, I saw four kids playing in the yard. One of them was only a few years older than me, maybe seventeen, he was clearly indulging his younger siblings, three girls, chasing after them with a water gun as they all giggled, holding up their hands, trying to prevent themselves from the ultimate drenching. These had to be Michael's kids. I never thought of them, not much, except when I thought about how they stayed by his side through everything. I guess I thought they were older, somehow. I put the bike on the curb across the way and sank down next to it.

I had spent years hating Michael White and weeks plotting to do away with him. I was so consumed by the thought of turning his brains to pulp, I didn't think about the people I would be taking him from. To these kids, Mike isn't a killer. He's a father. To kill him would make me no better than him. I would be taking away a father like he took away my mother. I'm trying to think about how I might feel at this age, if my mother were still alive and got into a car accident, or shot, something that ended her life. It might even be worse to have had fifteen years with her before she was taken rather than the four I got to spend. I'm not willing to chance it.

Picking up my bike from the street, I glance over at the house once more. A man I almost recognize is at the door telling the kids it's supper time. His beard is still full, but the dark brown has been replaced in some places with flecks of gray. My hands tighten around the grips of the handlebars and I swing my leg over violently, nearly knocking myself out of balance. He doesn't know who I am, but I know him. He looks weary, and I'm glad of that. I hope it's because he's haunted by memories of that night. By the pool of blood Uncle Larry found me in. The blood left on his hands. The blunt object that was never found.

As I pedal back toward home, I make a vow. Michael White will be brought to justice. Even if it takes me decades. Even if he's eighty years old. Someone has to believe me. Someone has to make my testimony mean something. I won't leave Middletown until Michael White is behind bars.

# Attention is Expensive

Brooke Wyant

(1989)

“Mom, come on they’re beautiful and look how nice they are on my ass!” I exclaim.

“You have such a way with words, Babette. You’ll have to try harder because I could probably buy 60 dozen eggs for that price.”

God, she’s so annoying. WHO needs 60 dozen eggs!? WHO? I’ll tell you. No one. No one in their right mind needs that many eggs.

“Mom, what else am I gonna wear? The jeans you want me to get make me look like I have a pancake butt. I can’t start second semester with a pancake butt!”

“Well,” she responds, “with that attitude you won’t have to worry about people noticing your pancake butt before they walk away. If you don’t stop being such a snippy little rip hole, you’ll be getting Beth’s hand-me-downs until you graduate.”

In all actuality Beth’s jeans are way more expensive and cooler than mine so it may not be a bad gig to get all of her old stuff, but I need these jeans.

“Ugh, fine. What if I never ask you for anything again?” She starts laughing, completely justified. We both know I’ll be asking her for something else in a matter of hours.

“Babette... why these jeans?”

Valid question, really. They’re a \$60 pair of Lee skinny jeans with seams that go right through the middle of my giant thighs. They look like someone took a pair of jeans, cut them into three pieces, and then sewed them back together in a really illogical way. I’ll admit they aren’t my usual taste. I’m roughly 5’ 5” in the right shoes, with a shape far from hourglass. In fact, I look a little more like a roll of cookie dough that someone squeezed. On the bright side, God did grace me with perfectly straight, white teeth, and baby blue eyes. But for a chubby, short girl with blue eyes and perfect teeth, I would still probably look a little bit like a tomato on two toothpicks walking around if I wasn’t careful pairing my outfit, but I had to have them. I tell her I don’t really know why need them and start singing “Got My Mind Set on You” really loudly. Mostly because I know it will embarrass her but also because there is no way I’m leaving without these jeans.

“Okay, Babette stop it! Here’s what I’ll do. If you promise not to sing any-

more I will give you \$20 towards your jeans and you can pay the rest.” I let out a deep, dramatic, very long sigh. I can think of about eight things, including beer and vodka for tonight that I could spend \$40 on but the jeans. And I can always go in with Pat and Judy for booze.

“Ugh, fine, mom. But I make no promises to not sing anymore.” She thinks about it, “Okay, then just promise no more singing in the mall?” I can accept that, “Deal.”

I pull the small investment off my butt, give the breakfast pants back to my mom to go hang back up, and eventually make my way out of the dressing room. She should really just be thankful I’m finally buying a pair of jeans with no holes and that I already bought my Nike high tops with Christmas money. I finally find her creeping through the clearance racks looking at the blazers. So many shoulder pads, so little time.

“You ready to go?” I ask.

“Yeah, let’s go!”

As we’re waiting in line to check out my heart jumps. In my wallet, right next to my cash, is Beth’s old ID. Beth is my older sister and we are practically identical to the point where, outside of our family, people mistake us for each other all the time. She gave me her old ID over Christmas break so I would stop asking her to get me alcohol for the weekends...

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I had asked her, “Hey, Beth, will you pick me and my friends up a case of Bud Light for Pat’s party tonight?”

“Oh my God, are you serious? I just got you some last week. This is the last time, Bubby.” God, I hate when she calls me Bubby. Stupid childhood nicknames.

“If you come home drunk again Barbara will kill me and have me taxidermied on the wall next to dad’s fox.” Eww, what a gross image. She was right though. I wondered if mom would do it so it looked like Beth was petting the fox...

“Ugh,” I sighed, “but what am I gonna do at school, get some weirdo with a wooden leg to get it for me?” She glared at me. She never thought my references to her getting a butterfly tattoo on her shoulder over the summer from a man with a wooden leg out of his van were as funny as I did.

“You’re lucky you have more to hold over my head than I have to hold over yours, you know that? Give me the cash or you’re out.” She tried to act like she’d ever sell me out.

“You’re the best, even if you probably have a disease from that tattoo.” I giggled.

She didn’t and said, “Watch it, mini Barb, I could always out you at anytime. Remember I’m moving out next week.”

My tone shifted, “I know... it kinda sucks.”

“Yeah, it kinda does but you know how they are. I can’t live here anymore and you’re gone at school so it’s even worse. They practically survive off of controlling my life.” She was right.

“Why do you think I went away for school?” I said.

“Yeah, yeah.” She understood and regretted not going away herself. I gave her the cash. She had a hold of her wallet and she was putting my money in it when she stopped and stared for a second.

“What’s wrong? Do you need more?” I asked.

“No, you’re good. It’s just... Well, here, take this with you so you can just get stuff your damn self.” She said, “I can’t have my baby sister getting booze from strange men in vans.” And she tossed her old ID to me.

“Seriously? Will it work that way? No one will know? Do you think I could get caught? Will I go to jail if I do? Will you go to jail?” She gave me the, “stop acting like a paranoid loser” look I had grown to know and love over the years.

“Calm down. If you don’t act panicky, like you’re acting right now, you’ll be fine. Just memorize the information which is exactly the same for you except my birthday and social security number are different.” She finished and walked out of her room.

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I meant to take it out of my wallet before mom picked me up from Jackson this morning but I completely spaced because I was trying to clean up from the night before. Let me tell you, I kinda figured it would be rough to get peach schnapps and orange juice out of a shaggy, white rug but it is much closer to the impossible end of the cleaning spectrum than I ever imagined. And don’t even get me started on the smell. I may have just been overacting but if you knew my mom, you would understand. She is basically me by looks, but 5’ nothin” with orange curly hair that stems from “I know you’ve done something wrong” follicles. She’s snoopy. She’s the type who can tell you snuck liquor from the liquor cabinet without even opening it--even if you marked it so you knew how much to replace and you replaced it before she got home. The woman doesn’t even drink! How she always just knows everything is beyond me but I have the grounded track record to prove it.

I spin around to “check out one of the jewelry carts” by the register and whip the money out while I’m turned around so she won’t see and put the ID in my jacket pocket. My heart is racing and I’m super nervous but she doesn’t seem to notice at all. The beads of sweat forming across my forehead were unnecessary but still prominent.

“Are you feeling okay, Babs?” Mom asks me, startling me and making my heart jump out of my mouth.

“What? Yeah, why?” I answer, “I’m cool.”

“You just look a little warm and your face is kind of red.” She seems concerned.

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine it’s just a little toasty in here,” I lie. I put the cash in her hand and move down to the end of the register to wait for her. Crisis averted, good work, Babette.

It’s about 5:30pm as we walk over to mom’s white Lincoln town car. The poor thing has seen better days. It screeches when you turn the wheel just far enough to the left and sometimes when you start it, it sounds like a prepubescent rhino in heat, or at least what I imagine a prepubescent rhino in heat would sound like if it were a thing. She asks if I want to go to “that one Mexican restaurant”

for dinner before she heads home. Usually this sounds perfect but I'm really not hungry and I'm more worried about getting some Bud Light and/or Seagram's and starting my night with Pat and Judy, who are probably waiting on me right now.

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As mom starts to roll away, I feel a wave of relief wash over me. Don't get me wrong, I love my mother and I appreciate her and all that but she can be a real drag. Walking up the sidewalk back to my dorm, all the nervous pressure is leaving my body and my stomach starts grumbling. All I can think about is how I should have taken mom up on that offer for dinner. I can probably con Pat and Judy into splitting a Godfather's pizza with me when I get back though so whatever. It's super cheap and delicious and I just spent \$40 on these jeans so it's a good option.

After waiting on the elevator for what seems like a lifetime, questioning why the genius who designed Jackson only made the elevator stop on the ground floor and the 6th floor, I hop on and ride it up. I live on the 5th floor so I take the elevator up to the 6th and then walk down a flight of stairs and through a labyrinth-style maze to get to my room. It's not as annoying as it sounds on a daily basis unless I'm grouchy, but it wasn't very pleasant on move-in day. I'll always envy the 6th floor girls.

As I approach my door, I'm praying my roommate, Tonie, won't be here. She's okay but she's weird. She wears all black and only hangs out with guys who have caterpillar mustaches and girls who wear black lipstick. It's strange. She also doesn't talk to me no matter how hard I try. Slowly opening the door bracing myself for whatever I'll walk in on, I'm hoping she'll be out and I can just drop my things, change, and jet off to Pat's. A welcoming empty pizza box next to her pillow and some Chinese take out boxes next to her alarm clock welcome me, but no her. Our room smells terrible but I'll take it. She must have had her friends over and then left and forgot about her trash. Whatever, I don't care.

I shut the door, grab my walkman with side B from The Wall in it, hit play, and flop down on my bed with my jeans in hand. I tell myself I'll just listen to one song and head to Pat's. It's so nice to just lie here and be alone. Tonie is gone for the first time in days, my mom left, and I can't even remember the last time I was completely by myself! It's absolutely beautiful. There is no pain, you are receding. A distant ship smoke on the horizon. You are only coming through in waves. Your lips move but I cannot hear what you're saying. When I was a child I had a fever. My hands felt just like two balloons. Now I've got that feeling once again. Pink Floyd consumes my thoughts and next thing I know, Pat and Judy are shaking me awake. I won't lie I am certain I'm in the middle of an earthquake. When I'm finally out of my hazy, post-nap, fog I realize I'm very much alive in Jackson dorm and not about to die in the depths of a hole in the middle of the floor.

Pat starts yelling at me from the moment my eyes open. "Babette! What the fuck? Are you serious? It's only 9 why are you sleeping?!"

"Yeah, you loser," Judy starts in. "We thought you were shopping with Barbie this whole time and you've been here sleeping! It's time to party. GET UP!"

Tonight is the night that we explore an abandoned house!”

“Alright, damn! I’m up, I’m up. What are you saying about a house?”

I get up, still in a bit of a fog, trying to figure out where the hell the last few hours have gone. They flip my radio on in the corner and start singing Bad Medicine at me. Now, don’t get me wrong, Jon Bon Jovi is my man but I wanted to punch them in the face. I’m by no means a “ready to go after waking up” kind of person. In fact, I’d say 95% of my communication before noon is a mixture of grunts and groans.

“Judy, hello? What house are you talking about?” I remind her.

She goes on, “Oh! My friend from speech was talking about this mysterious murder that happened in this house on the south side! Me and Pat have been talking about it all day and we found out the house is abandoned now and on Primrose Avenue-- which is kind of weird but whatever. I wanna get drunk and go exploring!”

Okay, that’s fucking creepy. I’m intrigued but not enough to want to go check it out. What the hell? This is how people die. I’ve grown up in a small town my whole life. Moving away for school and coming to Middletown University has been a culture shock for sure. The most exciting thing that happens in my hometown of Auburn, Indiana is this old car festival that brings floods of people into town for three days out of the year and then we’re just boring old Auburn again until the next year. I’m not naive to the fact that people get murdered all the time, I’m just not too thrilled about being a murder scene dweller, ya know?

“Did she mention when it happened or how or anything?!” I ask, mildly terrified but trying not to show it. Judy, however, is all about it. She keeps going.

“Oh, yeah! It was in March 1979. Okay, so, this lady Clara had a boyfriend and he was a real sleaze. He was married and had four kids but met Clara at the diner she worked at and started having an affair with her.”

I but in, “He’s married and has kids?! What a shit head! I can’t believe that! Where were his wife and kids all the time? Did he just leave at weird hours in the night or what?”

“That’s what I said when she told me!” Pat interjects. Judy glares at both of us. “Do you wanna know the rest or not?”

“Okay, sorry, keep going.” We say in unison. Pat already knows everything but he’s one of those guys who can hear the same thing over and over again and still find it fascinating.

Judy rolls her eyes and keeps going, “So Clara had a four year old son who hated this boyfriend from the beginning and she kept seeing him anyways. I guess he was really abusive and she tried to leave him a couple times but he always lost his cool and beat her up so she got scared and stayed with him.”

“Ugh, I hate when girls do that.” I interrupt, “I get it but I don’t.”

“Get to the murder, Judy!” Pat yells.

“Sorry, damn! Well the girl was telling me she heard he was an alcoholic and he got drunk one night and came back over to the house after leaving and broke in. Clara told him to leave. He just lost it and started beating the shit out of them and then he just left them there overnight before going back. He went next door to the neighbor’s and accused Clara of killing herself but the neighbor didn’t buy it because there was blood everywhere. Want to know the worst part?”

“No but yes,” I say.



“The little boy was still somehow alive the next day and they took him to the hospital and he made a miraculous recovery. He is the only one who saw this guy kill his mother but no one can trust for sure and prove it because of all the brain injuries he sustained. So the guy who killed Clara is still out there free somewhere. How fucked up is that?”

“That’s pretty messed up. I can’t even imagine,” I agree. My stomach is in my shoes and I’m not feeling too great about going to this house.

“We have to go check it out! It could be so cool, you guys,” Judy pleads.

“Or creepy as hell,” I grumble.

Without missing a beat Judy says, “Come on Babette. Don’t be such a baby. It’ll be fun!”

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“Okay, guys ready to go? We can go take some shots in Pat’s room before we take off.” I’d just changed into my favorite black MU shirt and my new jeans. I almost don’t but then I decide it’s a good idea to bring the red MU jacket my mom made for me too. I’d rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it. God, I sound like my dad.

“Yeah, we’re ready when you are! But we have a confession. We drank the rest of the alcohol in Pat’s room while we were waiting on you because we got bored,” Judy tells me.

“Okay, so does that mean I need to go get more?” I ask.

Pat says, “No, my brother went and got us some vodka we just have to pay him when we get there. The only reason we finished what was in my room was because we figured you could grab what you have left from when Beth visited a couple weeks ago and take a couple shots before we go.” Beth did buy me a bottle of Smirnoff when she was here last and I have at least a few shots left in it. And as gross as it probably sounds I think I still have one more diet Coke in my closet! I have to hide them or crazy Tonie drinks them because she is the devil.

I grab my vodka, diet Coke, and the lone shot glass Beth brought me from home, it reads, “Swallow it all, mate.” She thinks she’s so funny. I put it all on my dresser. After that murder story, I’m ready to pretend it never happened. Six shots later, the bottle is empty after a couple ugly faces and gags. I’m feeling pretty okay with the exception that my throat burns and my chest is warm but I know in about 30 minutes I’ll be feeling a lot better.

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Marshall, Pat’s brother, lives with a couple other boys about a mile away from our dorm and it never seems that far until we actually decide to walk there. It’s on College Avenue somewhere. I want to say 228 but I never actually pay much attention to the numbers because I’m always drunk by the time we get there and this time will be no different. This house is the type of house that makes you wonder how people do anything other than party in it. A place where you can drop a drink on the floor and walk away leaving it pool out from the spill zone and not think to ask for a towel and feel fine about it. It’s just grungy and gross.

As we’re strolling by all the buildings along the way, we’re wishing we had a

sober driver to tote us around in my baby blue Cutlass. Usually we're okay about having someone stay just sober enough to drive so we don't have to walk but not tonight. After all it's almost April so it isn't bad outside. It's soggy, as Middletown can often be described, but still acceptable walking weather. About 30-45 minutes of complaining about walking go by and we're climbing the stairs to the front door.

Dan, Marshall's roommate, opens the door.

"It's about time you fools got here. We've been waiting on you for an hour."

Judy answers, "Yeah, blame Babette, she fell asleep instead of telling us she was back from shopping." I love Judy but sometimes I wanna deck her.

"It's true. I'm the worst. How dare I accidentally fall asleep without telling them." I sarcastically respond.

"Well, we're all here now. Have you seen my brother? He said he got us some vodka for tonight." Pat clearly doesn't want to deal with Judy and me.

"Yeah, he's upstairs. I'm sure your stuff's up there too. Go ahead." Dan closes the door as we head upstairs.

Pat knocks on the door and Marshall answers. His eyes are bloodshot and his room is full of smoke but we still walk in and sit down in the half circle that's formed with two boys and three girls we always see here but never remember who they are. Getting high has never really been my cup of tea. I participated one time, ate an entire box of Captain Crunch, woke up in the middle of the night sure that my mouth was dryer than the Sahara, and decided it wasn't for me. Waking up with the roof of my mouth scraped raw one time was more than enough. From then on out I concluded, I'd just stick to drinking.

Pat and Judy take a couple hits while we're talking about random things. Have you ever wondered why they put braille on drive up ATM's? No? Me either until tonight. It's not like a blind person is going to be driving.

Once they're good, we meander back downstairs to see what was going on there. People are overflowing each of the rooms like biscuits coming out of Pillsbury cinnamon roll cans in the hot summer sun. I guess it is probably only 10:30PM and I'm already feeling pretty drunk and I haven't even had any of the alcohol we got from Marshall yet. When I get drunk I start to feel it first in my eyes and then from there it goes to the rest of my face, especially my lips. Well my eyes felt like they were trying to bulk up for swimsuit season before we even hit Riverside and now I can't feel my lips so, I'm in for a treat tonight. I look over at Judy hoping if I ask her to pee she'll come with me and she shuts me down.

"You know how it'll be if we pee now. We will pee every 20 minutes for the rest of the night. Fight the urge, Babs! Fight it!" She yells.

"Alright, I respond, "well I'm gonna go because I can't hold it so I'll be back in a few. Will you be here?"

"Yeah, I'm not drunk enough to dance yet so I'll be here or in the kitchen," she answers. As I'm walking away, rolling my eyes, I can only think, Fuck off, Judy.

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I am drunk. I feel it in my whole body now. I'm starting to get hot and I'm not even doing anything. I take my jacket off and tie it around my waist. I think I

need to head back soon but that means I have to convince the other two to come with me and spoil their exploration plans. My mom has told me a thousand times not to walk anywhere alone after dark. She would have zero sympathy if I were robbed or something because I tried walking back alone. Pat is on board without any explanation after I tell him what's going on when I come back from the bathroom because I don't think he was too keen on the whole exploring an abandoned house idea either. He pretends to be on board with all of Judy's plans but I can tell he just does it because he doesn't have it in him to just tell her no.

We spot her in the kitchen from the living room and slowly make our way there.

I start talking because Pat is behind me and she would have never heard him over the music.

"Hey, Judy we're gonna head back. You ready?" She looks at me obviously not feeling like leaving and feeling even less like heading back and missing the opportunity to explore this house.

"I thought we were going to get Dan to drive us to that house on Primrose?" She whines.

"Come on Judy, do we HAVE to do it tonight? I'm pretty drunk already because I forgot to eat dinner and I'm not super into the idea of going over to the south side right now." I'm not interested.

"Well, I'm not too super into heading back to Jackson at 11 on a Saturday night," She snaps.

"Judy. Come on. We can always go tomorrow during the day or something," Pat always tries to be the good guy.

"How about this, by the time we get back to Jackson, Pat will be pretty sobered up because he didn't drink much and we'll get into Babette's car and do a drive by and if you babies are too scared we'll go back by there tomorrow?" She hates not, at least, getting part her way.

"Okay, fine Judy. WE'LL DO IT YOUR WAY LIKE ALWAYS." I yell. I am definitely drunk if there was any doubt before now. She just irritates the life out of me sometimes and my filter is nonexistent when I get to a certain phase of drunk.

"Alright, stop it." Pat raises his voice. "Let's just go check it out and go from there."

It's chilly out but in the most refreshing way. I'm still a little warm from being in Marshall's packed house. The hair on the back of my neck, that has been wettened by sweat, feels like the wind is flirtatiously blowing on it and the fresh air is the most satisfying thing my lungs have felt in hours. I close my eyes and just stand still in the wind for a second and then follow them silently. I'm glad I have my jacket because though it feels good right now, I know I'll get cooled down and want in shortly.

We're right next to the McKinney parking garage now and all I can think of is stupid flowers and how pretty they are. I don't even like flowers but I can't stop looking at them. After an entire winter of nothing but grimy looking dirty snow, since Middletown doesn't wear white well, the flowers are so warm and hopeful looking. They aren't even fully blooming but I just want them. Without thinking about it, I take off running, with the grace of a drunk, three-legged elephant towards the flowers along the wall to the garage. I never run so I don't

know what possessed me to do so this time but before I know it I'm tripping over the curb and eating it right into the ground. I stay there for a second partly because I'm giggling at my own grace but mostly because the ground feels so nice on my hot face. As I stand up, gain my footing, and start wiping my legs off, finding a giant tear in the knee of my brand new jeans, a spot light lands on my dew-soaked face.

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"Where you headed there, turbo?" A cop is approaching me from his car.

"Well, if I'm being honest, I wanted a flower but the curb prevented that from happening."

"Yeah, I saw that. You fell pretty hard. Are you alright?" For a cop he seems pretty nice.

"I mean, if we're talking physically, I'm good. My dignity is sore but I'll survive," I reply.

Without a pause, not finding me all as amusing as I'm finding myself, he asks, "Got your ID on you?" Fuck. I didn't bring my purse or anything with me. I'm so screwed. I'm going to jail. Minor consuming. Good thing I probably have a grass stain on my face it will look really nice in my mugshot. My mom will be so proud to come pick me up. OH MY GOD WAIT. I HAVE BETH'S ID.

"Yeah, it's in my pocket." I reached in where I had stashed it away at the mall earlier with my mom and handed it over.

"Bethany?"

"Yes?" I'm slightly impressed with the speed of my response and not forgetting "I'm Bethany."

He looks me over, "You're a ways from home. What are you doing at Middletown tonight?"

"My sister goes to school here. I was just hanging at a friend's house," I think that's a pretty good cover. It's kind of true.

"Where is your sister?"

"She said she had to volunteer in the morning" I fib, "so she stayed in with some of her friends. That's where I'm headed now."

"You know it's not very safe to be walking around here by yourself after dark, right? Where are you heading exactly?"

"Yeah, you sound just like my parents." I chuckle, "I know better but it was walk back alone or stay at my friend's and I wanted to stay with my sister. She lives in Jackson."

"Your parents sound like smart people." He smiles, "It's pretty well lit from here to Jackson. Get to your sister's and stay safe, okay?"

"Yeahp, you got it. Thank you." I'm turning around to walk away.

"Hey, Bethany." He raises his voice a little. I almost don't answer.

"Ye--, uh, yes, sir?"

"You may want this." He hands me Beth's ID and I starting walking away towards the student center.

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I make sure he's completely out of earshot before I start in.

"Pat. Judy. You assholes. Where did you go?" I'm half whispering, half yelling looking for them around the parking lot. They come struggling to get out of the prickly bushes next to the west side of the student center that faces Ellis hall. I've always wondered what that place looks like on the inside because it looks like a castle from the outside.

"What the hell you guys?! Why didn't you say anything about that cop?"

"Well, you took off running in the opposite direction so we just assumed you saw him too." Pat says.

"Well, shock, shock, surprise, I fell over the curb going after flowers and had no idea."

"Haha, Smoooooth," Judy giggles.

"Shut up, Judy. I don't need your shit right now."

"Come on, Babs. You know if it had happened to either of us it would be funny," She claims.

"Okay, maybe." I say and we all start laughing.

"So what happened, did he say anything?" Pat's so nosy.

"Well," I say, "He asked me a bunch of questions and asked for my ID and I started having a panic but thank God I remembered I had Beth's old one with me or I probably would have gotten arrested or whatever happens when you get caught running across the street like a moron and fall down for being an underage drunkard." They start laughing.

"Yeah, well, thankfully you didn't because I don't think I could bring myself to face Barbie ever again if you got arrested," Judy says in a joking tone but we all know she's serious. We know it would be the end of freedom as I know it if I ever got arrested.

I think the cop freaked Judy out because suddenly she isn't so fixated on exploring this house anymore. She says, "If you guys don't wanna check that house out tonight, I'm totally fine with that. I'm getting tired and all the alcohol is setting in and I could totally go for a Godfather's pizza." That bitch knows she can win us both over with pizza almost any time.

"Fine by me. I think Babette is about done for after that fall, too. Let's just head back and we can check it out tomorrow?" Pat agrees pretty easily and I'm fine with it. I'm starving and my body sort of hurts so pizza sounds like a good way to drown the pain.

"Yeah, let's just get a pizza and chill. I think almost being arrested is enough excitement for me for one night."

I remember the hole in my jeans and instantly my mood shifts. I'm so pissed at myself for not paying closer attention. Then again I paid so much for these stupid jeans I can't afford to pay attention too. Whatever. I guess I can at least be thankful I didn't rip the ass or crotch out of them. I can still wear them if there's just a hole in the knee. So much for buying jeans with no holes. Sorry, mom.

# Between the Beams

Sarah Hollowell

(1986)

The day Kimmy Duncan and Lisa Sutton find the boat is the same day Reggie Temple let the *CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF 1986* banner fall on Kimmy's head, and her math teacher, Mrs. Harold, gave her a letter to take home to her parents. *If Kimmy doesn't pass the final, she won't be graduating next weekend.*

Around the time Kimmy was reading the letter in the second floor girl's bathroom, Lisa was writing out a list of all the classes she wanted to take at Middletown University, based on her sister's old course catalogue. She's already drawn a diagram of what she thinks her dorm room with Kimmy might look like. She hasn't yet convinced her parents to let her live in the dorms - when she lives in Middletown already, isn't it a waste of money? - but she's hopeful. She plans to hang purple curtains from the window.

When they meet at McCulloch Park after school, Lisa tells Kimmy all her plans, and Kimmy mostly listens.

They walk the path to the old bridge. It once housed train tracks, but they were ripped up long ago, leaving only the steel frame. Getting across is tricky. Kimmy likes to do it by spreading out her arms and walking one of the narrow beams like a tightrope, one foot in front of the other, toe against heel. She never looks down when she walks. She jumps over the beams that run across and lands on her feet every time.

"What was with the banner today?" Lisa asks as Kimmy takes the first steps onto the bridge. Lisa always stays on solid ground, pacing like a worried mother. Kimmy doesn't say *oh, that was just Reggie being a racist asshole*, because she can't prove it. His slurs are always whispered, not shouted, not public, not even obvious. It's not something Lisa - pale, blonde hair tied in a ponytail over her shoulder - would understand.

"Nothing," Kimmy says. "Some lame accident." She speeds up her steps across the beam. She's starting to feel the crosswind.

"What about math?" Lisa asks. "How's that going?"

"SORRY, CAN'T HEAR YOU," Kimmy shouts back. "THE WIND, YOU KNOW."

Lisa rolls her eyes. She thinks *If something was really wrong, Kimmy would tell me.*

Kimmy reaches the center of the bridge. She turns on her heel and looks down at the gap between the beams. It's more than big enough for someone to fall through, and it's a twenty-five-foot drop. It's past the shore, well over the river. It's a height that could kill her, paralyze her, leave her only bruised - too many variables go into that kind of fall.

Too many variables to everything, and Kimmy's not good at math. Most days, she doesn't even feel real. She doesn't feel like she exists. She puts issues of *Vogue* and *Time* side by side on her bed. She counts the number of black models in each issue, and it's always a tiny percentage of the white models. She rubs perfume samples on her wrists while reading updates on *Challenger* and Chernobyl.

The entire world is exploding into radioactive pieces but she's just sitting in Middletown.

Not really existing.

She closes her eyes, just for a second, puts a foot out, and thinks, *This could be my way out.*

Then Lisa shouts her name.

Kimmy opens her eyes and returns to the world.

She ignores Lisa for half a second, long enough to enjoy the wind, but not so long that Lisa gets frustrated. Then she heads back across the bridge.

Lisa hates going across the bridge - has always refused to do so - but she loves being under it. It's hidden from view from most angles. It's a perfect private spot. Lisa has three siblings and a nosy mother. Most of the time, she's happy to be the perfect sister and daughter, but it can be nice to escape for an hour or two under the bridge with Kimmy and be someone else. Someone who slides, laughing, down the steep path, not caring about what might happen to her Chucks or new pink leggings, who sits on the shore of the river and shares a cigarette with her best friend.

Except today, when Kimmy and Lisa go under the bridge, there's a surprise waiting.

"It's a *boat*," Kimmy says. She runs to it and caresses the plastic hull. A long, thin crack travels across half the bottom. She's not sure if that's the sort of thing that prevents it from being seaworthy.

"It's more a canoe," Lisa points out.

Kimmy sighs. "*Canoe* sounds silly. *Boat*, though?" She traces the crack, trying to get a feel for its depth. "*Boat* is a word full of opportunity. Hope."

She says it in a *haha only serious* sort of voice. She doesn't want to sound crazy, but she's also forming a plan that she needs Lisa to agree to.

"It probably belongs to someone," Lisa says.

"No way, this is abandoned. I can tell."

"How can you possibly *tell*?"

"Because it looks like the rest of this goddamn town," Kimmy snaps. "It looks abandoned and empty and like no one cares about it."

Kimmy and Lisa can't remember exactly when their hometown started dying, if it had happened before their births, or sometime in their childhoods, but they know the truth well enough. There were more abandoned factories than a town should have. More abandoned houses. Lisa tries not to see it as death, just a slump. Kimmy can't see it as anything but a slow, agonizing demise that's going

to take her with it.

And there's more to it for Kimmy. Kimmy's all too aware of the lynchings in racism in Middletown's not-so-distant past. As the town dies, the remaining racism hasn't died with it. In some spots, it has become more virulent. More concentrated.

Surely, Kimmy thinks, it will be better in a town with some life to it.

"Sorry," Lisa says.

"It's fine." They're silent for a moment, then - "But we could," Kimmy says. "We could take care of it."

"The canoe?"

"The *boat*."

"Fine, the boat. And what?"

"Use it. As a way out."

"A way out?" Lisa echoes, not yet understanding.

"Of Middletown," Kimmy says.

Lisa feels a flutter of panic in her stomach. She hides it and hopes to only look unconvinced.

"How is a *canoe* our way out of Middletown?" she asks.

"*Boat*," Kimmy corrects. "It's a boat, and we're going to sail it down the river and right out of here."

"To where?"

"Wherever! That doesn't matter."

"Shouldn't it?"

"*Lis-aaaaaa*," Kimmy groans. "Come *on*. Planning is the death of adventure."

"Deep," Lisa says.

"Lisa, please. This could be amazing. We can leave right after graduation, just tell our parents that we're going to parties, and get out on the river instead." Kimmy makes a grand sweep of her arms at the river before them.

When Lisa looks at the river, she sees Middletown. She sees its flowing, beating heart. She sees the future all planned out - down there at the bend is graduation, then college where (hopefully) she meets her true love, then marriage, then family. She'll be a teacher like her mother. English, she thinks, though history could be fun, too.

She's never seen it as an escape.

She still doesn't. She looks at the river and thinks *we can't sail out on that. It's too shallow, too rocky. This isn't how the world works.*

But Kimmy takes her hands, and they're warm and her smile is eager and Kimmy's always had this undeniable *something*.

Lisa decides that if this will make Kimmy happy, she can agree to it. They'll never really sail out anyway. Kimmy will get distracted by graduation, Lisa will stall through the summer, and then college will begin and the canoe will be forgotten entirely.

"Fine," Lisa says. "Let's do it."

"Oh, thank you, Lisa, thank you!" Kimmy wraps her up in a hug. "I couldn't do this without you."

"Really?"

"Yes," Kimmy says. "Your dad knows stuff about boats."



“Well, yeah -”

Kimmy takes the sleeve of her baggy sweater and rubs some of the dirt off around the crack in the hull. “Do you think he’d know how to fix something like this?”

Lisa sighs. “Yeah,” she says. “I can ask him. But he’ll want to know why.”

“Tell him I’m wondering. No follow up that way,” Kimmy says. “But ask him soon.”

“What’s the hurry?”

“I want to leave after graduation,” Kimmy says.

“I’d hope so,” Lisa says, laughing.

“Listen, just - ask him as soon as you can and we’ll figure it out from there.”

They don’t return to the river for five days.

On that fifth day, Kimmy takes her math final.

Or at least she’s supposed to be. The paper is on her desk, the pencil is in her hand, but she’s staring out the window.

She did *try*. She flipped through all five pages in the test and she did every problem that she knew how to do.

That was about five of them.

She attempted two more, but then the tears started, and she didn’t want to cry in class, so instead she’s staring out the window. She puts her hand on her forehead like she’s thinking, but she’s actually sniffing her wrist. That morning, she dabbed it with *Ombre Rose*, a perfume sample ordered right out of March’s issue of *Vogue*. They described it as *alluring, long-lasting, and lavish*.

It smells so *not like Middletown* that for a moment she escapes. She’s in New York or Paris. She knows the river can’t get her that far, but it’s a start, isn’t it? She turns in her final unfinished, and slips a note into Lisa’s locker to meet her at the bridge. She skips out on the rest of the day.

When Lisa gets to the bridge, Kimmy is standing at its center. She’s straddling one of the crossbeams. Her feet are planted solidly on the steel to fight the strong crosswinds. She’s decided, for now, that she doesn’t want to fall. Lisa calls her name and Kimmy runs across the bridge to join her.

“Have you talked to your dad?” she asks.

“Where *were* you?” Lisa asks. “Did you skip on one of the *last days* of school?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well - how did your math final go?”

“I don’t want to talk about it!”

“God, okay!”

They glare at each other. Neither of them are willing to break the silence, but Kimmy’s impatience overwhelms her.

“*Well?* Did you talk to him?”

Lisa sighs. “Yeah, I did, but -”

“But what?”

“There aren’t a lot of viable options. He said in a pinch there’s something that can be done with a hair dryer, but something called *plastic welding* is better, but none of those can be done here and we don’t exactly have a way of getting the canoe -”

“Boat -”

“The *whatever* to my dad’s shop.”

“So...what do we do?” Kimmy asks. Not fixing the canoe isn’t an option. Not leaving Middletown - with a failed final, with no high school degree - isn’t an option.

“He said that if it’s a hairline fracture - if it’s not too deep - then we could probably fix it with duct tape. I’m not sure it’s the best or more permanent option, but it’s what we have.”

“That’ll work,” Kimmy says. “Did you bring any?”

“No,” Lisa says. “I came here straight from school and I don’t keep duct tape just hanging around in my locker.”

“That’s fine. Maybe I could get it done while you’re at graduation...”

“I’m sorry - what?” Lisa asks. “Are you not coming to graduation?”

“I’m not sure,” Kimmy says, hedging.

“Kimmy!”

“It’s not like it’s mandatory!”

“It’s your *high school graduation*,” Lisa shouts. “You can’t skip it for some stupid, half-assed plan!”

Kimmy steps back, one foot on the bridge. Lisa sees the hurt on her face, and a sick feeling grows in her stomach.

“Kimmy, I’m sorry -”

“You think it’s stupid?” Kimmy asks.

“No, I just -”

“But you *agreed* to it.”

“Kimmy, I -”

Kimmy holds up her hands. “I think I don’t want to talk about this right now, okay?”

“Kimmy, please -”

But Kimmy turns around and flies back across the bridge, where Lisa can’t follow.

Lisa watches her, but not for long. Eventually her temper rises and soon she’s angry that Kimmy won’t just *listen*, that she won’t just *grow up*. So she goes home and leaves Kimmy on the bridge.

Kimmy skips graduation.

She gets up early, before her parents, and she leaves her house. She doesn’t go anywhere near school or her home the entire day. She doesn’t think about Lisa looking in the row that she should be, checking her watch, sighing. She doesn’t think about her parents in the audience at graduation, searching for their daughter in line.

Instead, she duct tapes the canoe and then goes to the bridge, walks to her center beam, and she sits. She stares down at the water and she grips the steel. She doesn’t fight the wind. She thinks *if the wind can push me off, then it was meant to be*.

Whatever courage or foolishness helped Kimmy brush off her fear about failing her final two days before has disappeared. Washed away somewhere down the river, too far to catch. She sits on the bridge and calls herself *stupid*, *idiot*, *worthless*, every name she can think of. She wishes to stop existing.

She's still there at sunset, when Lisa arrives and calls her name. Kimmy stands.

Lisa's wearing her graduation dress, the pink one with the ruffles that they picked out together a month ago, with matching pink ballet flats. She's beautiful and so full of a *real future*, but her arms are still crossed and she looks worried.

"I'm sorry," Kimmy says, too quietly at first, and of course Lisa can't hear her, so she yells: "I'M SORRY."

"WHY? I SHOULD BE SORRY," Lisa yells back. "ARE YOU OKAY?"

"I'M SORRY," Kimmy says again. She looks down at the rocky river below. She holds one foot over the gap between the beams. Lisa screams her name. "I'm sorry," she whispers.

Kimmy doesn't expect Lisa, who's never gone on the bridge, not once, to start running towards her. Lisa shouts her name, and she turns -

The toe of Lisa's pink graduation flat catches on a bolt -

- and she trips -

- and she's gone.

She hits the ground below with a *CRACKthunk*.

She's dead before Kimmy can register that she fell. She falls onto the shore, but her head hits the canoe, and her brain drowns in blood.

Kimmy runs across the bridge faster than she ever has. She scrambles to the shore, thinking *Lisa wasn't that far out, maybe it's fine, maybe she's fine* -

She knows as soon as she sees her that it's too late. She's too still. She's not breathing.

Kimmy throws up in the grass and her thoughts are all *oh god oh god oh god oh god oh*

She looks over her shoulder and Lisa's still there and she's still dead and

She heaves again and tastes bile, bitter and sharp in her throat, but there's nothing left to come up.

She needs to run and find help, even if the help is too late, even if -

But *god*, how will it look, the black high school drop out standing over the boy of Middletown's golden girl?

Will anyone believe Kimmy if she says it's an accident, if she says it wasn't her fault?

She can't stay here.

She can't *leave her* here.

Kimmy's not sure that anyone else even comes to this spot, that anyone would ever find Lisa, and the thought of her rotting here -

But no. Someone has to come here sometimes, when the girls are gone. Or Lisa must have told her parents. She tells them everything.

Someone will find her.

Kimmy's throat hurts from bile and the ache of unshed tears.

The hardest part is pushing the canoe out away from Lisa, and the way her body falls over without its support. Kimmy pushes the canoe to the shore, far enough away that she doesn't have to look at Lisa or feel her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm sorry."

She shoves off and jumps in as the sun disappears past the river's horizon.

# About the Authors

## You are Here: Finding Yourself in Middletown

*(in alphabetical order)*

**Kristal All** is from Berne, Indiana, where nothing interesting ever happens. She will graduate from Ball State University in 2016 with a degree in English education. After graduation, she plans on teaching English somewhere near Houston, Texas. Kristal enjoys reading fiction, but only recently began to dabble in creative writing. Her favorite author is Michael Grant, and she loves recommending books to her friends, classmates, teachers, or anyone who will listen. Her dream is to inspire students to love reading, writing, and learning. She hopes that her naturally enthusiastic curiosity will make others curious and positive about life, too.

**Anna Butler** graduated from Ball State University in 2015 with a B.A. in Creative Writing and Video Production. She enjoys all kinds of storytelling, especially those that utilize magic realism, and is constantly mistaking serendipity for magic in her own life. More than anything else, she enjoys dogs, hiking, and being nice to people, and figured she should probably turn one of those into a career somehow. She plans to pursue a team or project management position, possibly at a non-profit of some sort, so that she can continue to be nice to people in a more official capacity.

**Rachel Crawley** studied English literature at Ball State University. She's interested in feminism, queer theory, fat studies, and everything else that deals with bodies and the ways we navigate them through this strange world. She likes paying attention to emotions and social dynamics, but she also likes cats and smoothies and playing pop songs on the ukulele. She hopes to enter the publishing world and continue working on being barefoot as often as possible.

**Christina Dionesotes** graduated from Ball State University in May 2015 with a Bachelor of Arts in English Studies and Spanish. She will be continuing her studies this fall at NYU Madrid to pursue an MA in Spanish Applied Linguistics. Christina is planning to travel around the world, running away from her student loans. Eventually, she will be a translator and work to bridge the gap between Spanish-speaking and English communities.

**Naté Hardin** will graduate from Ball State University in 2016 with a B.A in Creative Writing with minors in Classical Culture and Linguistics. She loves literature and ancient culture and plans to further study these subjects at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia for her Fall 2015 semester. She loves bacon, thinks baby hedgehogs are the cutest (but not adult hedgehogs), and stuff.

**Sarah Hollowell** studied creative writing at Ball State University. She has a lot of opinions, and tweets about them maybe too much. She's somewhere on the road to her dream of being a young adult author. Her nonfiction has been published in *The Butter*, *The Gloss*, *Side B Magazine*, and hopefully many more places to come. She talks to her cats more than she talks to people.

**Chris Hunley** is from Mansfield, Ohio and is currently studying English Literature at Ball State University. He hopes to land a job in the publishing industry and move to major city like Seattle, WA. Chris enjoys reading fantasy novels in his spare time as well as shopping. His story entitled *Political Masks* is based on a real Mayor from Muncie, Indiana - where Chris currently lives and goes to school.

**Johnna Lorenzano** is from Indianapolis, Indiana and is currently studying English Education at Ball State University. She hopes to land a job teaching students an appreciation for reading and writing. In her free time Johnna enjoys reading young adult fiction novels, rollerblading, and playing with her puppy. Johnna wrote her story *Letting Go* as a tribute to her grandmother Maria Lorenzano who survived a difficult childhood during the Great Depression and World War II. Johnna hopes that her story can inspire others to remember that life is less about what happens to you, and more about how you choose to react.

**Cassie Lynch** grew up in Michigan City, Indiana and is currently studying French and English Studies at Ball State University. She always is doing something and writing, running, music, and eating are among her favorite things. She is interested in feminism and relationships between individuals and groups and likes to explore the different ways people interact. After she graduates she will co-own her family construction business and she hopes to inspire others to do whatever they want regardless of the challenges they face.

**Colin Noll** studied creative writing and computer science at Ball State University. He knows he can always improve upon his work, and is willing to progress towards what the future holds in store for him whether it be as a technical writer, a creative writer, something else, or all three. He's not afraid of tackling problems in new ways, though he prefers to discuss and ponder over things, rather than tackle them.

**Jillian Jenee** is due to graduate from Ball State University in May 2015 with a major in English Studies and a minor in Telecommunications. Her future plans are to move as far away from Indiana as humanly possible and to obtain a law degree in Family/Juvenile Law...or Criminal Law. She hasn't exactly decided yet. She plans to start her own law firm and program for troubled teens.

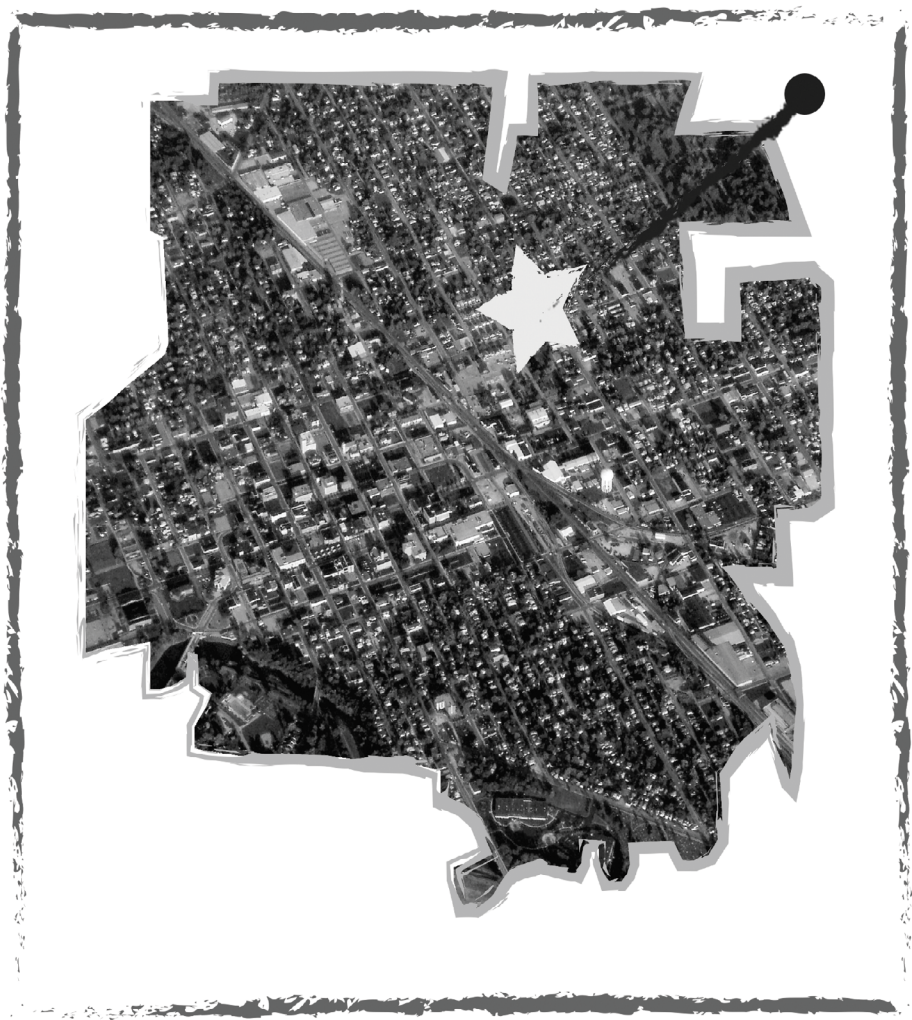
**Allison Springman** was born and raised in Crown Point, Indiana. She graduated from Ball State University in 2015 with a B.A. in English, and her love of books inspired her to focus her degree on Literature. She enjoys reading books of all kinds, but finds YA fantasy fiction to be her favorite. She hopes to one day join a publishing company and have the chance to work closely with authors of all genres.

**Hannah Vollmer** is a fierce country-drawlin darling from Jasper, Indiana, the home of Scott Rolen, the Strassenfest, and the "Wood Capital" of the world. She graduated from Ball State in 2015 with a B.A. in Creative Writing and a minor in Professional Writing and Emerging Media. She is a triplet, learning her feisty attitude and strong sense of humor from growing up with two mischievous brothers. She is interested in historical fiction, and loves to learn people's stories through chatting over coffee, wine, or any sort of beverage. After a two year mission with FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students), she hopes for a M.F.A in Creative Writing, a dude ranch in Wyoming where she can write, and help aspiring authors achieve their dreams.

**Lauryn Wiseman** hails from Mishawaka, Indiana, neighboring town of South Bend, Indiana, home of Notre Dame University and The Studebaker National Museum, both of which played a role in her upbringing. She is a 2015 graduate of Ball State University, where she majored in English creative writing and minored in English literature. Her poem, "weak coffee for weak souls" appears in the spring 2015 issue of The Mochila Review, and her creative nonfiction essay, "Mouthful of Maybes" is forthcoming in the fall 2015 issue of Prairie Margins. Lauryn also attempts to maintain a poetry blog dedicated to her writing, but often neglects to post. Her interests (other than writing) include, but are not limited to: petting cats, procuring goodwill sweaters, drinking tea, and believing Stevie Nicks is more magical than the wizarding world of Harry Potter.

**Brooke Wyant** Music addict. Avid gum chewer. Compulsive chapstick applier. Cat enthusiast. A man once called her precocious at the grocery store when she was five. She is now a graduate of Ball State University with a B.A. in English and Communication. She loves witty, intellectual conversations with people who understand their opinions and can support them in a nonjudgmental fashion. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing, chilling, and long walks on the beach but thinks piña coladas taste like what sunscreen smells like.

**Robert Young** was born and raised in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He graduated with a BA in Creative Writing from Ball State University in 2015. He will be continuing his studies at BSU to pursue an MA in Creative Writing. Though he switches back and forth between fiction and poetry, he loves reading and writing of all kinds. He loves all types of music and all things Pink Floyd.





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